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A STIFF-NECKED GENERATION



A

STIFF-NECKED GENERATION

BY

L. B. WALFORD

AUTHOR OF 'TROUBLESOME DAUGHTERS,' 'MR SMITH: A PART
OF HIS LIFE,' 'PAULINE,' 'COUSINS,' 'THE BABY'S
GRANDMOTHER,' ETC.

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A STIFF-NECKED GENERATION.



CHAPTER XV.

HE WAS THE SYMBOL OF HER TRIUMPH.

“ Stay—if I am never crost,
Half the pleasure will be lost.
Lovers may of course complain
Of their trouble and their pain ;
But if pain and trouble cease,
Love without it would not please.”
—ANON.

RIGHT or wrong, wise or foolish, if Lady Caroline's daughter had said she would do a thing, that thing would she do ; and thus it came to pass, that the happy major had the happiness of reporting his happiness home, by that very evening's post.

The letter went in Mr Liscard's own post-

bag, and was written at Lady Caroline's own davenport.

She was up-stairs, poor lady, dressing for dinner—that dinner to which Gilbert had at last made good many intentions of stopping, and it was well indeed she was so, as she was thus saved knowing the insult that was being added to her injury.

“May I write here?” inquired the now privileged guest, seating himself easily in the well-known, well-detested chair, and thinking, as he did so, how some day, but not just yet, he would have a laugh with his betrothed over the light in which it had hitherto been regarded by him. “I want just to send my old pater a line,” he added; “he is expecting it.”

“Is he?” Rosamund was standing by, triumphant and successful. The great ordeal had been gone through, and she had carried the day in the very teeth of bitter opposition and reproach.

Her mother had been made to yield, her

father had unexpectedly stood forward on her side, and her lover had shown himself bold and resolute, and had furthermore justified his being so. The few words which she had overheard passing between her parents subsequently had been music to her ear. "The settlement will be exceptionally handsome, and the position perfectly suitable. We should be absolute fools to refuse," had been uttered in her father's tones with an energy to which no one was less accustomed than his wife, and perhaps it was in consequence of this that her reply, "The thing is done. You have given your consent," was muttered in lower and more uncertain accents than was usual on her part. She had then been silent for a long time, and Rosamund had run away rejoicing.

She stood rejoicing now by Gilbert's side.

He was in her eyes the symbol of her victory. For him she had battled and won, and she was proud of her prize. His heroism of the previous day was still investing him

with its glory, added to which here he was, such a fine, big, handsome fellow, that it was in itself something to call such a man all her own.

And then he loved her. And Rosamund had never been loved before. It was a new and wonderful experience.

“Why, you see, I’m a dutiful son,” explained Gilbert, truthfully enough, “and,” he added, with a laugh, “moreover, I am a dependent one. You understand that, eh, Rosamund?”

She had been “Rosamund” for fully two hours now.

“Oh yes.” Not that she did, or cared,—but it would have been “Oh yes” to anything at the moment.

“I could not have spoken to your father without first consulting mine. I had to show I was not exactly a pauper, you know,” said Gilbert, smiling complacently.

(“The settlement exceptionally handsome,” quoth Rosamund, internally, and was pleased

that he had so acquitted himself ; but for her own part she would almost have preferred poverty. Romantic eighteen not infrequently does.)

“ They will all be immensely pleased,” continued the writer, opening the paper-and-envelope case, and proceeding to rummage through its contents.

“ Are you looking for anything ? ” inquired she.

He was, in the hope of turning up a sheet with a coroneted stamp ; for not being learned in such lore, he could not help thinking the august Lady Caroline must be entitled to such.

“ Is that paper not right ? ” questioned Rosamund, solicitously. “ I am afraid it is rather a small size. Mamma never writes on any but the smallest paper, and no one else uses her davenport. This is her especial davenport, you know. There is every kind of paper on the library table. Would you not rather—— ? ”

But he would not rather at all.

It took his fancy amazingly thus to set his foot, as it were, on the neck of his enemy at the very outset of his career, and he protested that the smallest-sized paper in the world would do for all that was required.

Then she had to send her message, and that in her own hand; and she found it strangely pleasant to have the "little hand"—which, by the way, was not particularly little, and had never been noticed before—kissed and admired, and the writing itself praised—though it was about as bad as a well-educated young lady's very best copy-book handwriting usually is.

Gilbert, like a true gallant, was in love with his fair at all points, and stuck at nothing. Neither black nor golden hair had, he vowed, any attractions for him; nothing but brown—warm, red, waving brown (passing his hand over the brown in question)—could ever command his homage. Tall women he detested; likewise short, broad, stumpy ones. Rosa-

mund's height was perfection. Likewise were her eyes, nose, and mouth perfection ; likewise were her beautiful voice and ringing laugh ; likewise, moreover, was her dancing, and her running, and her riding—to listen to him was like drinking one long, deep, perfumed, intoxicating draught.

At last she got away, scarce knowing what ground she stood upon ; how she felt ; where, or what she was.

In her hand were the flowers he had bidden her wear ; her ear rang with his sweet flatteries ; and her cheek was flushed with his kisses.

What a day it had been ! She was trembling all over with excitement ; thoughts, recollections, hopes and wishes whirling tumultuously through her brain ; gleeful anticipations, making all the future dance before her vision ; while even the present was far, far beyond anything the past had ever been.

What was now to her the dulness, the grimness, the oppression of that endless routine,

which had seemed as if it must go on for ever and ever in that house? What were the rules, and restrictions, and debates, and cogitations over every trifle, and difficulties over the making of every new acquaintance, and prohibitions in which Lady Caroline delighted?

She was about to flee them all. The yearnings of her soul were to be satisfied at last. Emancipation was at hand.

What though she must now speed like lightning through a toilet delayed to the last minute? Anything, put on anyhow, would look well on such a night. Little Esther, the handmaiden, understood very distinctly the hurry and the frolic of such a dressing, and participated heart and soul.

All the household were Gilbert's adherents. If they thought at all of Lord Hartland, the other eligible bachelor, it was to conjecture that he was not yet ripe for matrimony, but that he would, in all probability, one day bring home a titled dame, who would

reinstate his fortunes, and enable him to fill Lady Julia's place when Lady Julia should be no longer there.

That day, all devoutly hoped, would be long in coming.

For good Julia was greatly beloved, and her summer treats and winter festivals, her gifts, her charities, her indulgence, and her easy rule, were appreciated scarcely less at King's Common than at the Abbey itself.

So my lord was not to wed just yet. That being settled, Major Gilbert was a fine suitor for Miss Rosamund; and his being in her lady-mother's black books rather added to his popularity than diminished it. He had precisely the sort of jovial, authoritative air which most tells with inferiors; he was liberal with his money; and he gave himself no airs. Added to which, it was a treat to see him riding at the head of his men through the streets of Longminster; and a comely corporal, spanking over now and again, in full uniform, with a note or a message, and an

important notion of the officer who had despatched it — all went into the same scale.

It stood to reason that the rescue of Billy Barley placed the already well-disposed hearts of all at Gilbert's feet.

"Do be quick, Esther. There's the five-minutes gong."

"If you jump about like that, miss, I shall never find the fastenings."

"Skip one or two. No one will be the wiser."

"I shall have done in a minute, miss."

"How nicely this frock fits, Esther!"

"I thought you had complained of the shoulder-straps, Miss Rosamund. I had been going to see about altering them to-morrow."

"Never mind troubling about them now. I must have been mistaken. They look very well to-night."

"Do they not cut you, miss?"

"Cut me? No. Or if they do, I don't feel it. Oh, they are all right—quite nice,

quite comfortable." ("And they will not be needed long," thought the fair wearer, with a bounding heart. "Soon, soon I shall leave them, and all besides, behind me. Oh, what a new, new life it will be! How delightful, how free, how glorious! He says I shall go everywhere with him,—travel from place to place, see fresh sights, and places, and people, at every turn. We shall never be in the same spot two years running. Perhaps we shall be ordered abroad. At any rate, he is to take me abroad; and when he gets leave, we are to go wandering off shooting and fishing in all kinds of wild places. How different it will be to going about—even if I ever *had* gone about—with papa and mamma! Then, we should have had engaged carriages, and private rooms, and all the rest of it. I should never have so much as got down to a *table d'hôte*, not I. How Frederick would laugh if he knew the sort of way we do things! I know there has been an idea floating about lately of a trip next summer.

A trip? Oh, I can guess the sort of trip it would have been! Thank you, mamma; I'll leave it for Catherine now, if you please. But Frederick and I together, what fun we will have! He likes fun as much as I do. Even now the change has begun, for I am to be taken to the flower-show after all, and he scouted the very idea of our places being filled up at the luncheon. He said that all his fellows would want to see me, and be introduced. What fun! How grand I shall feel! Some of the officers are married already; but I, as the major's wife, will take precedence of them all, for the colonel is not here. The idea of mamma and Aunt Julia not seeing all this, in their absurd infatuation about Hartland! I hope their eyes are opened at last. Why, Hartland went over on purpose to give his support to Frederick—at least I am sure he did. Frederick said he was so very kind about it. Frederick said——")

"Miss Rosamund, you will never be finished if you don't stand still a moment."

“Oh yes, yes, yes. Yes, Esther, I shall,—I will,—I am finished. There’s a good Esther. What? Have I not washed my hands yet? Oh, this nice hot water,” plunging in the round dimpled arms, “oh—how—nice! The second gong! Dear me! Dear me! Coming—coming—coming. My little gold locket, Esther. Oh, not that stupid old thing. The tiny one with the ruby, and the thin gold band for the neck. There, that’s it,” bending her neck to have the clasp fastened. “There now, I’m off.” And light as a swallow she skimmed down the broad oaken staircase, just as Major Gilbert appeared in the hall from another set of chambers.

He caught her in his arms—and Lady Caroline saw it.

They did not know she was there, and no one ever knew why she had been there, but there she was. Slowly making her way across the ante-room, whose door stood always open—a way she had never been known to take before, since it was a distinct round from her

own dressing-room—Lady Caroline had been arrested by sounds from without, and turning round to seek the cause, she was an involuntary beholder of a spectacle which made every vein tingle.

There was Rosamund, her beautiful, brilliant young daughter, her wild, half-blown rosebud, the one human being who had stirred a spark of natural feeling in her cold and selfish nature, for whom in her heart she had prognosticated a gorgeous destiny, and mapped out what that destiny should be — and there, holding her in his embrace, was the man who had frustrated her hopes, and set her will at defiance !

Poor Gilbert ! Little did he know the agony he was inflicting. His affectionate, exulting, monopolising attitude ought perhaps to have been kept for another and a more secluded spot ; but still, he might have been forgiven, or at least Lady Caroline might have turned away her eyes. She did neither. With deliberate tread she advanced to the doorway,

and like the knell of doom sounded her leaden accents, "Rosamund, I want you."

Gilbert's arms fell by his side; Rosamund almost spurted from his embrace; and both flushed with vexation.

"Pray remember," said Lady Caroline, loud enough for each offender to hear, "that there are others in this house beside yourselves. Do not let this occur again!" and the chill, measured tones seemed to clank like a prison chain round the bright, free moment gone before.

"Could mamma ever have been young? Could she ever have loved?" muttered the now humbled and indignant girl, following her parent with sullen, shamefaced steps, and not even reassured by the presence of her fellow-criminal; "how unkind, how cruel of her to-night of all nights, to speak to me like that! And I had really been feeling sorry for her; I had meant to win her round; I had thought the worst was past. Oh, if mamma is going to be like that, how it will spoil

everything for the present. I wonder how she can—I do wonder how she *can* ! ”

She looked at her mother. What a worn, fretted, wrinkled face was that ! A spasm seemed to cross the brow and contract the corners of the mouth as she took the arm which Gilbert could not choose but offer, subsequently. Not a single word did she address to him. She could not. It was as if the power of controlling or disguising her feelings were gone. All were against her—her husband, her daughter, her guest, the very servants who stood behind her chair,—and they had overborne her by their weight ; but such was still her power, that they were awed and uneasy in her presence. The greatness of her affliction subdued their joy. The gloom upon her brow was harder to withstand than any open frown.

In vain did the combined forces struggle for serenity, for cheerfulness, and ease. The dancing light in Rosamund's eyes died out completely ere the terrible meal was over ; and

long, long before the last dish had gone its round, her lover had given up attempting conciliation.

Of the three, the one who faced her ladyship from his seat at the bottom of the table was the least concerned. Mr Liscard had asserted himself for once like a wise man, and from that wisdom-point he did not mean to budge—but, having done so much, he had no notion of bestirring himself further. The young people might smooth their own path, for him. They had his sanction for treading it together,—but his sanction and his support were two very different things; and he did not, if the truth were told, find that he cared very particularly whether his support were needed or not. It had suited his notions of selfish ease to permit his daughter to choose her own lot, and as the lot chosen would effectually take her off his hands, it was next to nothing to him whether the way to it were set with thorns or roses. If Lady Caroline made herself unbearable, it was but hastening the wedding-day, and he could

endure that ; his principal reflection being, as we have seen, that for a man with twelve children, the having one of them creditably, comfortably, and completely disposed of was too good a thing to be despised.

Even the mother's rage and disappointment were more respectable than the father's callous indifference.

"I suppose we must not slip off anywhere by ourselves, must we?" whispered Gilbert, when at length the wearisome repast was over, and the party had re-assembled as lugubrious as before, in the drawing-room. He really felt as if he must escape the tainted atmosphere, poor fellow ; it choked him, strangled him, unnerved and bewildered him. He had not expected it. With some pardonable self-complacency he had anticipated a little surprise, and a considerable relenting on Lady Caroline's part, once he had made his offer with its appropriate accompaniments ; and that, instead of this, he should be met with not only increased acerbity of countenance, but with

the addition of a silence so profound, so hopeless, and so impenetrable, that all seemed to quail before it, was discomfiting beyond measure.

He would not, however, suffer himself to be quite snuffed out. If he durst not speak to his love, nor touch her, nor hardly look at her before her jailer, he would make a shift to evade the jailer's watchfulness. "What do you say? Can we run off? To the library, or somewhere?" he suggested, accordingly.

The pair were by the piano, to which Rosamund had betaken herself, under the pretext of arranging some music, on the opening of the dining-room door, and the approach of her father and lover. It was, she well knew, the farthest spot to which she might go, away from that motionless figure on the large, solemn sofa at the other end.

"Is not this far enough?" and she glanced round, with a smile.

"By Jove! no. I should just say not. I have so much to say to you."

“ Have you ? ”

“ May I come over early to-morrow ? ”

“ Oh yes—to luncheon.”

“ Not till luncheon ? ”

“ Mamma does not care for visitors before then, you know.”

“ But I don’t come to see ‘ mamma,’ ” protested Gilbert, laughing ; “ I should never think of intruding upon ‘ mamma ’ at all,” he added, maliciously. “ You could meet me outside, couldn’t you ? ”

“ Perhaps I could—at least I think so—if—if,” said Rosamund, with another hurried glance round,—for after all, she was but a simple girl, and all unversed in the pretty ways of our modern belles,—“ if mamma does not mind ; but I think she would perhaps rather you came to the house.” She could stand up and defy her mother to her face, but she would never deceive her, she would not put out her foot by a single step on a slippery way.

Gilbert, looking at her, saw this, and in his heart approved. (“ Jolly good little creature,”

he thought. "No underhand tricks about her. She did not even see that I meant to propose she should hold her tongue, so I'll hold my own now.")

"Well, ask mamma; and say I am coming to take you for a walk, or something," he suggested, good-humouredly. "She cannot object to that, surely?"

"Oh no. But, Major Gilbert——"

——"Major Gilbert! I say!"

"What is it?" quoth Miss Innocent, saucily.

"'Major Gilbert' indeed! And didn't I make you say the other three times running, before I would let you off this afternoon?"

"Oh, but give me time, just a few days' time," with a glad little laugh; "this has come about so quickly; and I hardly know—I *don't* know how I feel at all to-night."

"Why, that is just what I want to teach you," cried Gilbert, who was not inclined to begin the lesson under surveillance; "but how on earth am I ever to do it if we are to be always like this, in the middle of everybody?"

I wish you could see some of the houses I go to; they have regular mischief rooms—call them mischief rooms—which the girls and boys go off to, when they want to get out of the way, you know. Have their own little games, you know. I used to be rather a hand at that sort of thing myself,—but it was all by way of joke,—I only did it because others did. I never really cared for any girl until——”

——“ Oh, take care ! ” Rosamund involuntarily stepped back a pace, with reddening brow. In his earnestness he had overlooked the men-servants, who, with the tea and coffee trays, were at his elbow, and she felt at the moment that, much as he might have to teach her, she had also something to teach him. He must learn to have more regard for appearances.

She now proposed music, hastily. “ I will ask mamma if she would not like a song,” she suggested, crossing the room ; but Gilbert was nearly sure that the request, which was presently brought back, had never emanated from Lady Caroline. Her reception of the timid

overture, her averted head, and the stubborn immobility of her form, were all rightly interpreted by him; it was possible that she had spoken—he did not think she had done as much—but she might; if so, however, he could have sworn that nothing but a withering permission to do as she chose had been accorded the petitioner.

“Treats my little girl as if she were the dirt of the earth,” muttered the incensed lover to himself. “And to-night, too, when one would think a mother with any feeling at all—but she hasn’t a particle. People say she is proud of Rosamund, but I’ll be hanged if I see the force of such pride! She has astonished even me, has that woman, though I did think I knew her by this time. Who would have believed that she could mean to keep up her vile animosity even now? Well, if it comes to a tug of war, she’ll get the worst of it; so look out, old lady. I must knuckle under for the present, but by-and-by, Lady Caroline, by-and-by——” and he sat down to the piano.

“Can I have a little more light?”

Rosamund turned to the nearest attendant.

“Another pair of candles, William, please.”

“That pair on the mantelpiece, that will do,” amended Gilbert, accustomed to order things as he would; “here, bring those, will you?”

“I think mamma likes to have a pair there,” said Rosamund, gently. “William will bring some more in a minute.” Unconsciously he had been on the eve of violating one of the greater proprieties of the place,—he had desired to disarrange the furniture without so much as a reference to its liege lady.

But the sea-song was heard at last, nevertheless; and one person present, at all events, enjoyed hearing it, and hearing it for the first time. Mr Liscard had an ear for, and a love of music, and he now felt that he had never been better nor less troublesomely entertained. The deadly dulness of his usual home-evenings made the present welcome contrast felt the

more. He was not required to say anything, nor to do anything; he could spread himself out in his low chair, con his scientific journals by the light of the shaded lamp at his elbow; and the melodious strains of the distant singer, so far from disturbing his comfort, acted as an agreeable sedative.

He was really sorry when at length they ceased, and Gilbert rose to go.

It struck him that a son-in-law who could thus provide his own entertainment would be rather an acquisition to the party than otherwise; and as he roused himself to wish a cordial "good night," it was with no disapproval that he beheld the tall figure turn its broad back on him and Lady Caroline alike, as both Rosamund's hands were held fast in those of her lover.

Rosamund's papa charitably put out his lamp. That gave him something to do, and he had a weakness for economising light—the only economy he ever practised. He now busied himself getting his fingers under the

shade, turning round the button, and peering over the funnel to see if all were right; and even when the manœuvre was over, he did not immediately obtrude himself upon the young couple. It made him almost angry to see his wife, drawn up to her full height, loom portentously forth from her seclusion ere anything more could pass; and he had never in his life been so near snubbing her ladyship in public, as when she bade him ring the bell the next moment.

The bell was to be rung, for Major Gilbert to be shown out; and the tone in which Lady Caroline desired that such should be done, might have fittingly conveyed a command for his never being shown in again.

He never was shown in again—to her.

CHAPTER XVI.

“YOU CAN’T MEAN *THAT* ?”

“Chances strange,
Disastrous accidents, and change
Come to us all ;
Even in the most exalted state,
Relentless sweeps the stroke of fate ;
The strongest fall.”

—LONGFELLOW.

“FINE old place, but a shade sepulchral,” quoth Major Gilbert to himself, as he stood on the doorstep at King’s Common the following morning, awaiting a response to his summons. “Rows of closed windows ain’t lively. I suppose there are windows open somewhere about the house, but it is a pity they don’t show in front. Lord ! how can people get on without fresh air, and on a day like this, too ?”—for a soft and balmy south wind was

gently fanning the tree-tops; and the closed windows, which had, moreover, their blinds drawn uncompromisingly down, certainly did seem to have an unreasonable ill-will against it. "What a time they are in answering!" cried he next, with a lover's impatience. But the next moment the door was noiselessly opened.

"Any one at home?"

He had made up his mind that he would not ask for Lady Caroline. If Lady Caroline chose to see him, and to be civil to him, well and good; he would make an effort to be civil in return, and preserve, in so far as he could, a decent appearance of having nothing to resent and forgive—but he was not going to be the one to make the advance. Whether she were in or out on this morning should not matter to him an iota.

During the previous evening he had realised that if he ever meant to hold his own with his future mother-in-law—and this he most distinctly did mean—he must not lose a

moment. He must get his hand in at once, brace himself persistently to disregard frowns and slights, and treat her ladyship with an easy, unconscious indifference which he was shrewd enough to perceive would be more galling than any amount of retaliation.

He would not be rude, but neither would he be vulnerable. He would present an impervious front, and baffle every attack by appearing not to perceive it. He would not let anything about the *blue gown* obtain the mastery over him. Accordingly his “Any one at home?” tripped readily out, and seemed to stand in need of no reply, for the speaker was on the mat within, wiping the mud from his boots—being a man of cleanly habits—the next minute; and it was not until he had put down his hat and stick, and pulled out his pocket-handkerchief, and stood ready to be preceded across the hall, that he perceived anything unusual about the man who had let him in.

It was a young under-footman who had

done so, and who now stood by his side, the picture of awkward, nervous hesitation, most evidently at a loss how to proceed in a moment of difficulty.

“Hey! What’s the matter?” demanded the visitor, stopping short in surprise, while half-a-dozen conjectures—all unpleasant ones—flashed into his brain at once.

Was there going to be any trouble ahead? Was yesterday’s work capable of being undone to-day? Had mischief been brewing in the night? Rosamund, what of her? Her evident timidity and awe of her mother recurred, like lightning, to his memory. Had, then, that unappeasable woman re-obtained her wonted rule, and already stolen a march upon him, laid hands upon his betrothed, locked her up, cancelled all promises, and ordered the doors to be shut upon himself? Had she—could she—have dared to do this?

That something was strangely amiss was but too evident, and the thing to discover was—what?

“We have had a terrible misfortin in the night, sir.”

Gilbert drew a long breath of relief. What was a terrible misfortune to him? That would certainly not have been the fashion in which his dismissal would have been made known, and on that point all his present uneasiness and anxiety centred.

“Oh, indeed!” he said, with infinite comfort. “What is it, eh? But never mind; show me in, and I’ll soon hear.”

“I—I—I really don’t know, sir; her ladyship, sir——”

“Confound it! let’s have an end of this,” cried Gilbert, with excusable impatience; “say what you have got to say, and have done with it. I can’t stop here all day while you hum and haw. Show me in to Lady Caroline,” he added, in a sort of desperation, and turned towards the inner hall.

But this was too much. “Stop, sir, stop!” and William stepped back a pace; the next moment out came the thunderbolt, “Her

ladyship is dead, sir. O Lord!" cried the poor young fellow, raising his two hands and letting them fall again, to enforce the full import of his words.

"Good God!" exclaimed Gilbert, glued to the ground whereon he stood. "Her ladyship is—*what?*"

"Yes, indeed, sir."

"Do you mean—but no, you can't mean *that?* You can't possibly mean that Lady Caroline is—good heavens!" wiping his brow. "Eh?—what?—eh? Speak out, and speak plain, for God's sake, so that I can understand. Did you say that Lady Caroline is——?" but he could not articulate the word himself.

"Found dead in her bed this morning, sir. 'Tis an awful thing, sir," and the speaker looked indeed white and scared, for the news was scarce cold. "They thought at first it was a fit; and the maids and Mrs Ossory was an hour in the room trying what they could do to bring her ladyship round,—but it was no use. And now the doctors have just gone,

and they say she must have been dead at the first. Dr Makin brought another gentleman with him to make sure. You must have met them in the drive, sir. They ain’t been gone many minutes.”

“No. I came the other way. But how—what—good heavens! I can’t think. I never heard anything more awful. Found dead in her bed, and she seemed as well as any of us only last night! Was any reason given? Is she supposed to have been ill? Have they any idea how it was?”

“I heard Mrs Ossory say as how her ladyship is supposed to have been ailing a long time, sir; and Mrs Ossory thinks she often noticed that her ladyship was not herself at all of late. Mrs Ossory thinks that perhaps it was the fright on Wednesday——”

“Wednesday? What—about the boy in the stream, do you mean? Oh, but Lady Caroline was as right as possible long after that; though certainly, to be sure—hum—ah—she did seem uncommonly silent and

out of spirits last night. She certainly did that."

"Yes, sir. So Mrs Ossory says, sir."

"Bless me—I never was so shocked in my life!" continued Gilbert, pulling his long moustache; and, for once in his life, completely at fault in respect of his next move. Should he depart or remain? He looked at William, and William looked at him, irresolution upon either face;—but the result was that they moved solemnly across the hall together.

"Lady Julia and Lord Hartland is here, sir," whispered the man, as he opened the drawing-room door; but it did not appear that he meant they were in the room, for it was empty, as a single glance showed.

Gilbert gazed mutely round.

He was inexpressibly bewildered and appalled, but it would be impossible to deny that he experienced also another sensation, and one equally novel to him at the moment—he breathed freely. For once in his life he heard the handle turn in the door, and stepped

forward upon the soft carpet within without a qualm ; for once he advanced from behind the large screen which guarded the entrance without trepidation ; and for the first time he looked straight up and down, and round and round the spacious, gloomy apartment.

That it partook still of Lady Caroline at every pore was surely natural, yet it struck him as curious. He had almost expected to see an instantaneous upheaval and revulsion ; but there was the davenport, the chair, the piano to whose refuge he had on the previous evening betaken himself, the pillar by which she had bidden him her stony “good night” —that “good night” to which there would never now be a “good morrow.”

Every window was darkened, and the place was sunk in gloom. It occurred to him as a strange first thought, that he now knew why the outer aspect of the mansion had struck him as funereal.

“It is the most awful thing,” he murmured, and stood upright in the middle of the floor,

not caring to take a seat. "Upon my word, I scarcely know how to believe it is true. To think that only last night she was sitting over there, hiding her face behind her fan, poor thing; and who knows what she was seeking to hide besides? For she was one of those women who would endure anything rather than pity; and if she was in pain—why, I have been a brute to be so hard upon her. I wonder if she was in pain! I feel ashamed to think of it all, if she was. But who was ever to know this was going to happen? Who would have guessed that the poor creature would be dead and gone before another day came? Well, I'm glad we parted in peace. I am uncommonly glad we had had no row of any sort; and no one now need ever know that she was not over fond of me. I must try and forget it myself; and, by Jove! I will."

Then he paused, and took up the strain again.

"There's her davenport now—queer and strange it looks already. It was beastly of

me to write that letter at it last night—I would not touch it with a pair of tongs to-day. What can have been the matter with her? She did not look the subject for heart complaint. No doubt it was the heart, though: and that made her more snappish than she need have been. Certainly she would never have been sweet. But nothing is so bad for the temper as anything wrong with the heart. . . . So Hartland’s here. He got on better with her than anybody did. . . . Lady Julia will feel it. She’s the right sort, is Julia. Lord, what a difference between those two! . . . It won’t make much odds to the husband. Cicero’s and Kant’s stomachs will go on all the same. . . . Our marriage will have to wait a bit, I suppose. That won’t be such a nuisance, as if—as it would have been. We shall be able to do pretty much as we please now, we two. . . . What an alteration this will make about the whole place! No one will know it soon. Well, it is ill speaking harm of the dead, else I must

say"—and he drew a long, broad-chested breath—"I know how I feel, though I wouldn't put it into words for the world."

His reverie had barely been brought to this appropriate close, ere the door opened and Lord Hartland entered.

The two shook hands in silence.

Then Gilbert burst forth impetuously. "I never had such a shock in my life."

His companion nodded, and the two sat down.

"When did you hear?" asked the major, next.

"Directly after breakfast. They had been trying to revive her for some time then."

"When do you suppose it took place?"

"Makin—that's our doctor—thinks, just before rising. The maids say she was still warm when they took her in hand, and they used all sorts of restoratives at once."

"With no effect?"

"Oh no; she had been dead before they began."

“Was her husband not on the spot? Was he no good?”

“Not at all. He was in his dressing-room—you know he is an early riser—and he thinks now he heard her call, but supposed at the time she was speaking to her maid. She had certainly striven to rise, for she was lying half across the bed.”

“Has—have you seen Rosamund?” said Gilbert, next. “You know it was all settled between us yesterday, don’t you? I was here till late last night.”

“I heard it was all right,” replied Lord Hartland, putting out his hand quietly. “This is rather rough on you; but you will help to comfort them all, Rosamund especially. She is with her aunt now.”

“Shall—do you think I ought to go away?” inquired Gilbert, who had been asking the same question of himself for the last five minutes, without being able to answer it to his satisfaction. “Of course I am not a relation

—I mean one of the family yet ; and I should not like to intrude if——”

“Oh no,” said Hartland, with a faint smile, “it could not be called intruding. You have a right to stay, and I should say my cousin would be disappointed if you left. She will see you presently.”

“What is being done ?”

“The usual things,” and Hartland took up a paper-knife and played with it absently. After which, the two sat a long time in silence, gazing for relief into the fire.

“It is an awful thing,” at last observed Gilbert. It would be wrong to say that he enjoyed the awfulness, but certainly he had never supposed he could feel so easy, so comfortably solemn and subdued, as he now did in taking free possession of the large arm-chair—Mr Liscard’s own evening chair—and preparing to bear his part in whatever woful contingencies should arise. What a blessed thing it was that he had actually spoken, and had had his affair settled ! Had he delayed a

single day, it might have been weeks before he could with decency have come forward ; added to which, he could have had none of the melancholy distinction which he now foresaw, in wearing mourning for, and attending the obsequies of the great lady. He would even have lost the honour of that morning’s admission, and the sharing of Hartland’s silent watch.

At present there was nothing more for either to do but to watch and wait. An unearthly hush pervaded the mansion ; only now and again a door being closed with ostentatious deliberation betrayed the presence of other inmates ; the servants were in their own wing ; the children in their equally remote quarters ; and all the other members of the family were gathered in the upper chambers.

All, wheresoever assembled, trod noiselessly, and spoke below their breaths. The reaction had not yet begun ; and even the very little ones in the nursery were content with the novelty of being supplied with unusual toys

and sweetmeats, and suffered themselves to be suppressed, and neglected.

"I suppose the arrangements will devolve on you?" said Gilbert, presently.

"I will give any help I can."

"The boys are too young to be much good."

"And the two eldest are at school."

"There is no one, then?"

"I fancy Mr Liscard will be able to express his own wishes; and though I have not seen him, yet, he knows I am here, and can send for me when he chooses."

"The funeral can't well take place before the middle of the week."

"No."

Then another silence.

"I am glad I came over early," said Gilbert, nursing his knee reflectively. "This happened to be an easy day, and I was tempted."

"What o'clock is it now?"

"Not twelve yet. I meant to have had a walk or drive or something, and was here by

half-past eleven. But now,”—and he dolefully shook his head.

At length Rosamund came down.

She had been weeping, poor child, and at sight of the two figures who rose respectfully to receive her, tears flowed afresh. Until a few hours ago she had never known death, and had had indeed but little to do with the realities of life. So terrible, so frightful a jar upon the even tenor of her days was not to be at once comprehended, and was scarcely to be looked upon but with horror and amazement. Her mother dead—gone for ever—snatched away without a parting word or sign! The thing seemed too monstrous for belief; and almost as one in a dream, she had clung and wept, soothed by Lady Julia’s expansive, wholesome, and very real sympathetic tribulation. It had been an effort to leave her, even to come down and meet her lover—and yet it had been something to have a lover to come to.

She had heard that Hartland was with Gil-

bert, and had well known how quickly the former would depart on her approach; and indeed he had instantly begun to consider how best to do so, when there was a tap at the door, which made all turn their heads. A tap at the door—at that door—at a door that never was, and never was meant to be tapped upon!

What could it portend?

Only a housemaid entering with a message.

“Jane!” exclaimed her young lady, the moisture frozen on her eyelids, — “*Jane!* what is the meaning of this?”

Jane saw her mistake. In the general disarrangement of everything, it had been agreeable to discharge an errand which was not in her ordinary round of duties, and she had felt secure of its passing unnoticed. She now looked foolish enough. “Mr Badeley is out, miss, and William and John wasn’t in the servants’ hall nor pantry, and——”

“And you could not fetch them?” said Rosamund, in a tone that made the girl

shrink. “How dare you? Go this instant, and never let such a thing occur again. The idea of her presuming!” she continued passionately, as the intruder vanished. “Just because—just because—she would as soon have thought of flying as doing such a thing yesterday. And now!” and her tears burst forth afresh. It had been the first signal of the change.

“I had better go and see what she came about, however,” said Hartland, making use of the notion. “One of us is wanted, I imagine.” And he left the room.

All that day he was very little to be seen, and yet his presence was felt everywhere.

Insensibly one and all came to lean on him for directions and suggestions, for Major Gilbert was still too much of a stranger to bear the part he would otherwise have done, and it was due to Lord Hartland that the principal benefit which could have been conferred on the mourning house came to it in the shape of Lady Julia, who took up her abode there—

not altogether to please herself—for the first week.

“Rosamund ought to have you with her,” said Hartland.

“You mean because of her engagement?”

“Yes.”

“I did hope—I did hope—oh, my dear Hartland, is it really, absolutely, irremediably settled? Is there no way out of it? Must it be? The dear child was always so impulsive, so impetuous; and it all happened so rapidly that I had a kind of feeling as if this great loss might——;” and she looked wistfully into his face. Somehow or other she had fancied that her sister dead, might have been able to effect what living she had failed to do. “She was so set against it, poor, poor dear,” she murmured.

He was silent; he could not now say, as at another time he might and would have said, “unreasonably and foolishly set against it;” but neither would he acquiesce, nor hold out hopes which were most unlikely to be fulfilled.

“ I am sure if the dear child wishes me to be here, I will stay,” sighed Lady Julia, seeing this, “ but it will be a painful, painful thing to do. If indeed you would come also ? ”

But that he could not do.

“ My brother-in-law will not be always in his own rooms, will he ? ” was her next timorous inquiry.

“ Your presence will draw him from them sooner than anything else.”

“ And—and—of course I will remain if you wish me to do so ; but I must have my Hannah—or no, old Charlotte would be better—and some clothes—and oh, dear, there will be the mourning to be seen to. And all those poor children’s mourning also.”

“ You see you are really needed here, Aunt Julia.”

“ Well, my dear, well ; I don’t say I am not,” resignedly.

“ Rosamund is too young to have the charge of everything.”

“Much, much too young.”

“And she has her own prospects to think of too.”

Lady Julia groaned. Then out it all came again. “I cannot like this Major Gilbert. I care not what he has, or can offer. He is not worthy of her. He can never become *one of us*. While you——”

“While I?” said Hartland, with a smile, as she stopped short. “You think I should have done better for my cousin?” he continued, after a moment.

“A hundred thousand times better. And had he not come across her path just now, and had she not, as it were, been driven to him by—oh, I know, I see how it was. But for that, she could, she would, she must have loved you!”

Was it fancy, or did she see a strange expression pass over his face as she spoke?

He did not answer her. He did not speak again for some time.

At length he roused himself abruptly, as

was his wont after concluding a matter in his own mind. “Look here, aunt: it is not for me to dictate to you, but I will tell you plainly what my own feelings are about Major Gilbert. It is nothing to me, and ought to be nothing, that, as a companion, he is not strictly to my taste. He does not suit me; but what of that? It appears he suits Rosamund; and it is surely better that she should marry a man made of good sterling stuff, even although he be not pre-eminently a gentleman, than a fool with any amount of polish on the surface?”

“But all men are not either boors or fools?” plaintively murmured she.

But she was not to get out her say.

“It is useless to expect that such a girl as Rosamund will not choose for herself,” pursued Hartland, looking steadily in front of him. “Major Gilbert is quite the sort of hero to take her fancy.”

“Hero? Oh, I had forgotten!” and Lady Julia’s eyelids dropped again. “Dear, dear!

what an age ago that seems! Certainly we ought not to forget that good deed."

"It has come down to being a 'good deed,' has it?"

"But, then, I never dreamed of this to follow."

"Would that have altered your opinion?"

"My opinion is, that he ought never to have allowed himself to think of entering our family," averred the high-born spinster, with sudden asperity. "I must say that I do like people to know their places; and I must say, too, Hartland, that, knowing all you know, I think it was hardly kind," and her poor voice quavered with the unwonted accusation, "hardly quite fair, or kind of you, to be on his side."

"My dear aunt, he never asked me to be on his side; as a matter of fact, I was not—perhaps I am not particularly on his side now,—but it is nothing to him whether I am or no. He fell in love with my cousin, without saying 'By your leave' to any one; and it

was only when it was patent to all that she—she cared for him in return, that it seemed to me they were both being hardly dealt with.”

“But you certainly spoke of him with admiration the other day?”

“So did you;” and he half smiled.

“But you went on after you knew of this; after Rosamund had sent over the news, last night.”

“Which at once checkmated your enthusiasm. But you see, ma’am, somehow it did not act so spontaneously on mine. I admire Gilbert as much as I ever did; I admire his pluck and nerve, his self-reliance and self-devotion. I think he did a thing that day which only a fellow who was in many respects—and substantial respects—a fine fellow, could have done. And I honour Rosamund,” he added, slowly, “for having the courage to see this, and value at his true worth, a downright, straightforward soldier, who will do his best to make her happy. She is above minding

his small, trifling deficiencies. She sets us all an example. I, for one, am resolved to profit by it. In the light in which she sees her future husband, I too will look upon him, and," he added emphatically, "I will look upon him in no other."

"Well, I shall never like him; but I will suffer him," conceded the unfortunate Lady Julia, with the air of a martyr.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE REACTION BEGINS.

“ But some so like to thorns or nettles live,
That none for them can, when they perish, grieve.”
—WALLER.

No one ever hinted that Lady Caroline's untimely end had any connection with her daughter's engagement, although news of the two events got abroad at the same time. It was not to be supposed that her austere nature could have been seriously disturbed by ordinary emotions; and that emotions extraordinary had been induced was of course a secret confined to the initiated few. But even the home circle at King's Common, and the two who were almost a part of it at the Abbey—even these, who had been witnesses

of her discomfiture, and had marked its rise and progress, were unaware of the depths to which the iron had entered the proud woman's soul.

They were now ready to feel sure that she had been failing for some time past, and one could adduce one little instance, one another, which had not been noticed at the time, but which, in the new light thrown upon everything, started to memory, and gave support to the welcome supposition. Lady Julia was happily positive that her poor dear suffering sister had been misjudged throughout her life by reason of the infirmities caused by this secret malady; while Rosamund was equally fortunate in her divination that her mother's attitude towards Major Gilbert had been the outcome of this same internal martyrdom. It had chafed her spirit and blinded her vision, causing her to look upon everything and everybody with jaundiced eyes. Poor mamma! And Lady Caroline was forgiven and compassionated, and reverently made allowance for on all hands.

Gilbert alone in his heart knew better. As soon as the first softening influences of the shock had passed away, and he could dispassionately look the catastrophe in the face, the instinctive conviction gained upon him that deep-seated mortification, a sense of defeat, trouble, and wrath which could find no outlet, had hastened her ladyship's demise. The force and weight and hopelessness of the evil had been more than that proud and stubborn spirit could bear; and debarred from every source of consolation, and consumed with a bitterness of disappointment of which the world must perceive nothing, the moment had been too favourable for an insidious malady not to seize upon for an attack, beneath which she had sunk unresistingly.

Thus, while Lady Julia, Hartland, Rosamund, and all who were charitably disposed towards the dead, attributed her mental and spiritual shortcomings to a physical cause, Gilbert changed the order of precedence; and

Gilbert was in the right. It was—it had been—as he thought.

“To think that she should actually have gone and died out of spite ! Upon my word,” quoth he to himself, as he sat with lugubrious visage in a mourning-coach—“upon my word, we are well quit of her.” And such being his rumination, it is not to be wondered at that he was not quite so happy in his demeanour nor observations as he might have been that day. Up till then he had got on very well ; but the funeral over, his spirits rose, and do what he would, he continually forgot not to be cheerful, nor to move about with too brisk a step.

Now, to the youthful Rosamund, with all the redundancy of vigorous life glowing in her veins, this first great check which it had ever met, was, from the very fact of its being the first, gigantic in the magnitude of its proportions.

We grow on easier terms with sorrow as we advance in years.

But to the very young, the presence of a first death is in itself a fearful and appalling thing ; and when, through the advent of the grim destroyer, the ruling spirit of the place is laid low, and the irrevocable deed makes itself felt in all that is said and done, and in every circumstance, however slight, of daily life, there is apt to be an exaggeration of the manifestation of woe ; a feeling as if it were hardly right to move, to stir, to occupy the dreary hours in any way ; to open a book, unless it be a devout one ; or broach a topic, unless it have reference to the passing scene.

Accordingly, the poor child, and indeed all the poor children, did their best to act up to the prescribed formula. Catherine, who was by nature prone to display, flourished her black-edged handkerchief, drew down the corners of her mouth, and settled with herself that speech of every kind was unbecoming. Dolly, who was of another mould, easily affected to what her brothers, brother-like, denominated

“blubbering,” having “blubbered” at every point of the proceedings, more especially at meal-times—being incited thereto by an extra performance of her sister’s handkerchief—was now able, from sheer weakness, to rain tears at nothing. The little ones naturally followed the lead thus given; were more unhappy in their enforced holiday than they had ever been in lesson hours; hated the dark house and the drawn-down blinds; and construed a general sense of misery and discomfort, into grief for a mother whom otherwise they would hardly have missed.

In sorrow far more real herself, their tender-hearted aunt would fain have sought to cheer and comfort,—but unfortunately she had taken a severe cold almost immediately after her installation at King’s Common, lost her voice, and been finally obliged to keep to bed. Never was a good soul more ashamed of herself; and although far from being the useless burden, by which term she reproached herself, it is certain that the reed on which Hartland

had meant his young cousin to lean, was for the nonce a broken one. There was now no one to do anything for anybody.

"I never saw more unfortunate small fry," muttered Gilbert to himself. "It is too bad that no one does a thing to sprighten them up; and though they have been bullied and trodden down all their lives by a woman who ought never to have been a mother at all, they are taught now to look as if it would be a sin ever to smile again because she is gone."

"Let's have the children down," said he to Rosamund, suddenly.

"Down!" exclaimed she, in surprise. "Where?"

"Here, in the drawing-room. I daresay they are feeling bad, and it was hard on them to be hustled out of sight the moment we came home from the funeral. Let's all sit round the fire and tell stories, and chirp the poor things up a bit."

If he had only put the suggestion differently! She tried to think it was kind and

thoughtful; but as it now stood, it seemed almost a profanation of the day.

“He never liked poor mamma,” she said to herself. “But still Frederick should hardly have talked of ‘the funeral’ in that tone to me. I daresay he did not mean it. I am sure he did not know how it sounded; but—I wish he had not.”

“Well, shall I go and fetch them?” inquired he, innocently.

Rosamund hesitated. “It is not their time for being in the drawing-room. I think perhaps Miss Penrose would be surprised by their being sent for now.”

“Surprised! You don’t mean to say they are doing lessons? By Jove!”

“Certainly not,” said Rosamund, quickly, while a gleam of displeasure shot from her eye. “How could you suppose it?”

“I did not suppose it; I thought it hardly credible; but I must say I have seen so much that has astonished me about your mother’s ways with the children——”

——“Frederick!”

He hastened to apologise. “It is my ignorance, of course, Rosamund. Why, how is it likely I should know? I have never been in the way of youngsters. I daresay I should have spoilt them awfully if I had.”

“I am sure you would,” rejoined she, only half appeased. “And of course you cannot understand. Children have to be subject to rules and hours. It was the same with me when I was under Miss Penrose, yet no one ever said I was hardly dealt with.”

“The old story of the foxes and their tails,” quoth he, jocularly. “As Miss Rosamund Liscard had her tail cut short, so must Miss Catharine and Miss Dolly, and all the rest of the misses. But come, I don’t altogether see it. Why should the poor things not have better times now——?”

“Oh, *don’t*,” exclaimed Rosamund, as if he had stung her.

It was but a little thing; but he was always

saying, always doing such like little things. The night before he had hurt her thus.

The fire had been hot at his back, as the three sat at dinner—he, she, and his future father-in-law. By the side of the fender there stood a little screen, one of Lady Caroline's own peculiar little comforts, which had invariably been drawn out between her ladyship's chair and the fireplace. It had now been left folded reverently. No one had dreamed of using it, until Gilbert, all unwittingly, had risen, spread the leaf as he had often seen it spread upon the hearth-rug, and resumed his seat.

She had said nothing, could say nothing; but had experienced a glow of shame, an undefined sensation, which was, alas! to prove but the faint forerunner of many such.

No one had ever expected from the bold soldier refined perceptions or quick sensibilities; if Rosamund had been asked, she would probably have answered that whether he possessed them or not was a matter of indiffer-

ence to her—but in the present circumstances he was certainly unlucky, since no one could have known less how to adapt himself to them.

He now proceeded to blunder on.

“I meant no harm, I am sure,” he protested; “but you must own yourself, my dear girl, that it has been a dull day for the poor things; and of course they cannot settle to anything this afternoon; and bless me! it’s only three o’clock: what ever will they do with themselves till tea-time? It is raining hard, so they can’t go out and run about.”

“I should think not—to-day.”

“Well, I only vex you, so I will say no more,” rejoined Gilbert, good-humouredly. “You must forgive me, Rosamund, there’s a dear little thing,” and he put his arm round her with something of a deprecating embrace; “I am sure I am downright sorry ever to have mentioned the subject, for I would not do anything to annoy you for the world.”

Then all at once the clouds dispersed, the

brow cleared, and she would herself fetch the brothers and sisters, and tell them how kind and how good he had been to think of them thus in their adversity.

No, she would not be put off going. She had been stupid, and cross, and unkind, and he could only show that he forgave her for being so, by now letting her be herself the messenger to the little doleful party in the schoolroom. They would, they must be unhappy, of course; and poor Miss Penrose was doubtless having a trying time keeping the peace between one and another; it would be a real charity to relieve the over-weighted governess of her burden for a time; and away she flew, cheered in spite of herself by her own restored faith and affection, and thinking, poor child, how sweet it was to have to own herself wrong, and her master and lover right.

Of course there was astonishment and rejoicing in the dull, dreary room when so welcome and so unusual a summons was announced.

Catharine and Dolly, who were severally in disgrace on the same count, were pardoned on the spot; and all were swiftly dismissed in search of soap, and water, and brushes, preparatory to so important an event as entering the drawing-room at that hour.

“Frederick has sent for you, and says he will tell you a story,” had been the delightful message, at which even Catharine had brightened up; and Dolly, every tear dried as if by magic, had jumped to her feet in ecstasy,—so that even the whispered admonition not to be noisy and not to laugh too loud, which the full-grown sister thought it incumbent on her to add, scarcely sufficed to overcloud their outburst of sunshine.

After they had gone, Rosamund lingered a moment. She was fain to have still more gratitude and appreciation on Gilbert’s behalf. It seemed to her that her churlish response to his most innocent and well-intentioned overture had been so uncalled-for and ungracious that she could do no less than make her present

approval of it and of him known as widely as might be.

“Major Gilbert is so fond of children,” she began, “that he could not bear to think of the poor little things feeling lonely and wretched; and of course, Miss Penrose, they cannot be expected to understand all they have lost, so that there can be no harm in their being—being comforted a little, can there? Of course, Major Gilbert will keep them *quite* quiet.” (Gilbert had had no notion of doing so, although he might possibly be depended upon to “hush-hush” at intervals, if the giggles threatened to penetrate too far.) “It must be so very miserable for them,” pleaded Rosamund, who, in truth, needed only to plead with herself.

She alone, in her heart of hearts, cared to be honestly mourning for the dead. For the rest, the decorous outward demonstrations of woe sufficed, now that the first shock had gone by; and Miss Penrose, who had conformed with the utmost rigour to these in

public, had been conscious of slipping 'Vanity Fair' under the fold of her dress, and hastily withdrawing her feet from the fender, so as not to look too comfortable, when Rosamund's voice had been heard in the doorway. From her no demurs need certainly have been feared.

"Indeed, I quite agree with you, and think it only too kind and considerate of Major Gilbert," quoth she now, promptly. "I hope the children will not be troublesome. He must send them back directly he is tired of them. They have been a little trying to-day——"

"So Major Gilbert thought—I mean, he thought that very likely they might be, and that you would be glad to have them taken off your hands——"

"Oh, indeed! And he thought of me too? Really *too* kind," ("and like a perfect gentleman," thought the little governess in her heart). "Pray thank Major Gilbert on my behalf, and with my compliments, Rosamund," desirous of rising to the occasion.

“It is such a sad day for us all,” murmured Rosamund.

“Yes, indeed,” murmured Miss Penrose, in unison. She could not help feeling as if she had been somehow pulled up, and the faint light faded out of her face—for she perceived that it would not do to be brisk, even in praise of Gilbert, just yet.

“The poor children,” sighed the elder sister.

“Poor little things,” echoed the governess.

Bang went a door without, followed by a suppressed peal of laughter, scuffling of feet, and an evident scrimmage.

“What a noise they are making!” cried Rosamund, with a frown; and she was hastily proceeding to quell it, when the entrance of the little band, all soaped and shining, and glad with expectation, brought about a kinder intent. No, she would not be sharp with them, nor expect too much of them, that day. Their little rejoicing countenances should speak for Gilbert, and applaud him. They should

tell himself, moreover, that he was well with her, approved of by her, and sustained by her in all he did at this time; and even now—even now, alas!—a vague intangible something whispered that this assurance was needed.

“Come along.” And Rosamund smiled upon the group. “Come along, and don’t make a noise in the passage. Remember the servants. They would be shocked to hear you speak, you know——”

“Oh, *we* won’t speak, we don’t want to speak. He’s to speak,” cried one little voice.

“He’s going to tell us a story. You said he was going to tell us a story,” added another.

“About lions, I hope?” in a boy’s determined accents.

“And tigers, and camels, and elephanks,” in that of another and a smaller male.

“Elephanks!” tittered all the elder ones.

Rosamund was glad to get them off: she was dangerously near tittering herself.

Even Miss Penrose was with difficulty subduing a cheerful countenance ; and for the sake of decorum it was well that the scene had not been of more than a minute's duration, ere the door had closed, and she was left to the unaccustomed luxury of solitude.

It had been, as we know, Lady Caroline's code, that, lessons or not, Miss Penrose should be on duty at all times and seasons—should be felt, should be in the background, should be there. There was to be no escape for her, no freedom for her subjects ; no relaxation for the one, no chance of self-discipline for the others. And the consequences ? Rosamund was the first consequence—and with her only we have to do.

But no one knew better the folly and short-sightedness of the former scheme of life at King's Common than the worthy preceptress herself ; and any augury of a change was hailed by her with a most appreciative readiness. In excellent humour, therefore, she now hastened to her own apartment, there to

pour forth the full, feverish, and underlined account of the two great events of the week, to those of her particular friends for whom she had not had time hitherto.

It is not often given to any one to have two such pieces of intelligence as an unexpected engagement and a sudden death to relate at one and the same time, and perhaps the chilly little woman appreciated her luck all the more that news of any kind was hard to get in that secluded domain; at any rate she felt now quite revived and animated by her pleasant task, and we may be sure that the gallant officer, to whose kindness and consideration she owed the opportunity for discharging it, did not suffer at her hands. He had another claim, moreover, on her notice.

His rescue in the mill-dam, preceding, as it did, his offer only by twenty-four hours, had a right to be included in her programme. Never in her life had so much and varied material been provided for her epithets in so brief a period.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“ I WHO STOOD UP FOR HIM SO BRAVELY
ONCE ! ”

“ In the heart's attachment a woman never likes a man with ardour, till she has suffered for his sake.”—SHERIDAN.

“ BUT is it not the strangest thing ? ” cried the Gilberts, one to another, when the first shock of the second announcement had subsided. “ It really is the very strangest thing.” And it rather added to than diminished the zest with which they gave out Frederick's projected alliance, that the sudden death of the titled mother of his *fiancée* had been the first and immediate result of it.

“ No doubt she was overcome altogether, poor woman,” cried the soft - hearted Mrs

Gilbert, very much overcome herself by the idea. “Yes, indeed, ’tis too true, Maria,” to an old neighbour and friend who had dropped in, as people did drop in all day long at the Gilberts’, always secure of a welcome, and of the best of cake and wine, or tea, as the hour might be—“yes, indeed, poor Lady Caroline! Will you not take off your bonnet, Maria, and stop a bit to comfort us? Now do. That’s right. But you won’t take off your bonnet? Though, to be sure, you do look so nice in that bonnet, ’twould be a pity. And the room is not too hot for you? Mr Gilbert and myself, we are getting to be old people, and we like large fires. Yes, to be sure, poor Lady Caroline! Emily, my dear, just say, to let no one else in this afternoon, being as it is the funeral day,” in explanation to her visitor; “and ask them to let us have tea by four o’clock, Emily,—I seem to need my tea to-day; and, Emily, if there are any muffins to be had, just tell them to get some—though I doubt if it isn’t too early yet for

muffins. However, they can try. Yes, indeed, poor Lady Caroline ! And the marriage so agreeable to us all, and so satisfactory. But it's in my mind that it was just too much for the poor thing. An eldest daughter is an eldest daughter, say what you will about there being plenty left ; and 'twill be the first break in the family. The girls may talk as they please, but when they come to be as old as I am, they'll know what it is to have feelings. It's in my bones that Lady Caroline's feelings was too much for her."

"Delicate, no doubt," assented Maria. "The aristocracy, as a rule, are delicate ; so sensitive, there's no saying where to have them. And no doubt it was a great excitement ; and Lady Caroline would, as you say, have her feelings."

"Ah yes, Maria."

"Girls little think of all their mothers have to go through. It's all very well for them," proceeded Maria ; "they think it mighty fine to be off with their gay bridegrooms——"

——"Ah yes, Maria."

"But it's those left behind who know what the parting means," and Maria looked solemnly round; "they are the ones to be pitied," said she.

"Indeed it's true, Maria. Ah, dear," quoth Mrs Gilbert, taking up the ball again, "they little think, as you say, Maria. My son tells me Lady Caroline was anything but stout," added she, more briskly, "anything but stout, he said. Tall and thin, he described her; so what it could have been that was the matter with a person who was tall and thin—for of course *something* besides the feelings there must have been—I can't imagine. At first, said I, it must have been a fit; for you know there's no saying who will or who won't have fits; and I knew a lady, and I think you will remember her by name—Jane Tarvey, I mean, —who married a thin, lanky, pale-faced, long-fingered man, and he died of the cramp! Cramp is a dangerous complaint when you can't get at it; so maybe it was the cramp. And——"

“You never heard of the death till after you had written about the engagement?”

“No, indeed, or we should not have sent the letters we did; and of course we should not have written to the poor thing herself—I mean her ladyship—at all. Little did we know we were addressing a corpse! We were all in a hurry to write. For the girls were so pleased; and as we heard the family was a thought stiff and punctilious—not easy folks like ourselves—we just sat down all of us then and there, that Frederick might have nothing to complain of. And there,—to think of it, Maria,—at the very time we were writing ‘Dear Lady Caroline,’ was she lying stark and cold, and would never get her own letter!”

“And now, I suppose you have had to write again,” said Maria. “’Tis a strange affair from beginning to end.”

“Is it not?” cried Henrietta, with all the importance of being mixed up in it. “The strangest affair. You must know, Mrs Tim-

mins, that we had been on the look-out for this, for Frederick had confided in us girls directly he got father's consent; so then, Emily and I were on the tiptoe every time the post came in till we saw his hand. He said it would have perhaps come off even sooner than it did but for an adventure he had had—but he did not tell us what the adventure was.”

“I daresay he had come near breaking his neck, or something,” placidly put in Mrs Gilbert. “He is as venturesome as ever he was, is Frederick; and he will drive those nasty tandems——”

“Anyway, he was all right when he wrote, mother; and wasn't it good of him to write off the very day, and of her to put in a postscript too, Mrs Timmins? Father has the letter locked up; and he is having his nap now, or I would get it for you to see. He said it had only just come off, and was all right, and he was a ‘lucky dog,’ and was ‘as happy as a king.’”

“Ay, that was it. Frederick all over,” nodded Mrs Gilbert, beaming again. “Well, all I can say is, though he is my son, she is a lucky woman who gets him.”

“Well, she wrote ever so nice a postscript,” said Emily.

“Saying she hoped we should be fond of her, and that she was sure she should be fond of us,” added Etta.

“Ay, to be sure, those were her very words”—it was again Mrs Gilbert’s turn—“her very words, Maria; and there is no doubt we should have had her and the girls as thick as thieves directly. But there, they must wait for that, now.”

“Was he in the house when—when the death took place?” inquired Mrs Timmins.

“No, it was in the night,” replied his mother, with infinite solemnity and enjoyment. “In the night. Towards the morning. Ah! At the turn of the night, as they call it. That’s the time they go, mostly. Poor Lady Caroline!”

"Come, now, mother, there's no need to go on any more about 'poor Lady Caroline,' making us all melancholy," here suggested Miss Emily. "Let's think about the wedding and all that. When can it be, I wonder?"

"People are not so strict about mourning as they used to be," quoth Mrs Timmins, sagely; "a year at most——"

"La! a year!" cried Emily. "Why, what ever are you thinking of, dear? A year!"

"Oh, we couldn't wait a year you know,—we really couldn't," added Henrietta. "Besides, it is not done now among fashionable people. Six months perhaps,"—and she broke off sorrowfully, for even six months seemed an age to wait, when before they had contemplated—taught by their brother—six weeks at the latest.

"Well, I don't pretend to be fashionable," retorted Mrs Timmins, with some pique, "but I hope I know what's proper and becoming. One need not be fashionable to pay decent

respect to the dead ; and though I am only a plain person——”

But she was not to be allowed to call herself a plain person.

“Now, Maria, don’t you go and think the girls meant anything of that kind,” cried Mrs Gilbert, as peacemaker. “They wouldn’t think of such a thing as your not knowing about the fashions as well as anybody. But they are regularly upset, poor things, and no wonder. When you and I were girls, ways were different, and——”

“And an engagement was just an engagement,” said Maria, “and young people were engaged, and there was an end of it for many a day. There was no running and flying to be married ; especially when, as often as not, there was little or nothing to marry upon, and when——”

“But, you see, that is not the case with Mr Gilbert’s son,” interrupted Mr Gilbert’s wife, with an elation which it was impossible to refrain from showing. “Papa has come down

more than handsomely. I really am surprised myself at papa's liberality. The young folks need wait for nothing, and want for nothing.”

“I know Frederick had meant the marriage to be at once,” added Henrietta.

“Through papa,” subjoined her mother.

“He spoke of Christmas,” further informed Emily.

“Ay, we had Christmas in our minds, all of us,” said her mother ; “and if the wedding had come off a week or so before, we could have had a real nice Christmas gathering, and made a great occasion of it. Isn't it a pity now ? There is papa so well, with less trouble in his joints than he has had for years, and myself pretty hearty too. I declare it does seem a thousand pities,”--and she could almost have found it in her honest heart to be indignant with her new connection that should have been, whom fate had transformed into such a marplot and killjoy.

It would have been so dearly to her mind

to have had a brave Christmas merrymaking for her bonnie bride and bridegroom ; the whole house agog with fires, and fumes, and feasting ; her comely board bubbling over with good things, and rare wines from the innermost recesses of the cellar on the sideboard.

Many a splendid gift and many a choice hint would have been delightedly bestowed, neighbours would have been by scores presented to the bride, and the bride would have been trotted far and near, from house to house, in return. Frederick should have seen that his old mother was not so old yet.

And now the luckless Lady Caroline had spoilt all.

Not only had the dame of quality upset every scheme for present enjoyment, but she had even robbed the future of half its gilding. To say nothing of the festive season having gone by ere the nuptials could now be consummated, it would not be the thing—not the thing at all, as the poor woman sadly owned,

with tears in her eyes—to make of the affair the overflowing jollification it should have been, had nothing happened.

Of all Major Gilbert’s family, she was the one most to be pitied.

Em and Etta could still look forward to being bridesmaids, and conjure up visions of future visits to King’s Common, and even derive some comfort from the thought that these need be no longer such formidable and doubtful pleasures now that the great lady, who had even awed Frederick himself, and who would indubitably have frightened them out of their wits, was no longer there; but poor Mrs Gilbert, who was too old for new sights and scenes, and who had composed her excuse for not attending the wedding, even before her son had informed her of the engagement,—the poor lady, whose imagination had merely radiated among the flesh-pots at home, felt herself defrauded of her all.

“We must just make the best of it, Maria,” in the end she concluded; “but I do say, let

those deny it who will, 'tis a mysterious dispensation, and a most afflicting one all round ;" and probably there was no one present who doubted the sincerity of her woe, or failed to divine its true cause.

Let us now return to the neighbourhood of King's Common ; but before we once more approach that smitten household, still numb beneath its terrible experience, let us take a peep into another, a lesser, and a brighter home.

A brother and sister were together in a snug little parlour, each occupied in his and her several way, when suddenly the latter, whose business was not of an absorbing nature, in that it consisted of some mild family mending, raised her head, and thus delivered herself of the outcome of the previous half-hour's meditation.

" Jack, are you not going to call upon the Liscards ? "

" Certainly. "

" When ? I thought you would have done so by this time. "

“I will do it very soon.”

“A clergyman usually calls the day after the funeral.”

No response.

“The funeral was yesterday.”

Still no response.

“I think you ought to call at King’s Common to-morrow.” But as even this very direct suggestion provoked neither assent nor refusal, the rector’s active-minded little sister and prompter decided within herself to push the subject no further at present. Jack was busy, his hands were full of papers, and his nose was buried in the same: he was probably thinking of his sermon—Lady Caroline’s funeral sermon, which all the parish would come to hear, and which it would be no easy matter to preach—he must not be worried with other and more sublunary affairs.

She was a very thoughtful and intelligent little person, this Miss Clemmy, and confined herself to her own sphere in a way that was quite surprising for a parson’s daughter and a

parson's sister ; so that, although it might appear from the above that she was in the habit of whipping up her brother to the post of duty, it needed but half an hour's discourse with the fond and faithful little creature, or indeed but half a minute's look into her honest little face, to set all fears at rest for Jack. He had brought her there to be his little comforter, his little counsellor, and his little trotter round the cottages — each of which three functions she performed to admiration. His comfort was the study of her life, his honour and glory the sunshine of it. They were all in all to each other.

It has probably been forgotten that the rector of Hartland-on-the-Hill had been a boyish friend of the young earl, and that soon after his own succession to the title, Hartland had been able to offer Mr Stoneby the living. The small, rural, and somewhat isolated parish was exceptionally lucky in its having been accepted. For many, such a place would have had but few attractions ;

but Stoneby's health was not robust, and he was possessed of a small independence. He therefore had neither the desire for heavier work, nor the need for a larger stipend. He had, moreover, come to Hartland to look after its spiritual interests, and he did not consider that these were sufficiently discharged by his being in his pulpit of a Sunday. He meant to know his people, and to live among them ; to teach the ignorant, strengthen the weak, hold out a hand to the falling, recover the lost. That his old friend Dick Verelst, now become the Earl of Hartland and a great man, dwelt hard by, had not been allowed to rank as an inducement when considering the offer ; but once it had been upon other grounds conscientiously accepted, he had allowed himself delightful prognostications of walks and talks, with not a few kindly and wily resolutions for turning to the advantage of his flock those affectionate feelings which he knew were cherished towards himself.

The result had been completely successful.

Hartland had indeed become by degrees so much attached to the society of both brother and sister, that Lady Caroline had grown to lift her eyebrows and Lady Julia to prick up her ears—poor anxious dears—if he did but take over a pheasant or a hare to the rectory. Neither of them had been at all sorry for unconscious little Clemmy's absence during the latter part of the past summer, though it had been caused by illness in the family, and had been a real trouble to Jack. "He must just learn to get on without her. He must take a wife," Lady Julia had decided, cheerfully.

Clemmy, however, had now returned, having been away during the entire period when all eyes had been fixed on Rosamund and Major Gilbert, and, in consequence, she now knew of the engagement, without understanding the general attitude towards it.

She was immensely interested. There are certain people to whom an engagement, be it what it may, must infallibly be interesting, even if those most concerned in it have no

especial claims to notice ; but Rosamund—Rosamund, with her wild vagaries and rebellious beauty ; Rosamund, who knew no laws, owned no ruler, and sent wisdom to the winds, yet who was so young and sweet, and had had so miserable an upbringing—Rosamund was a sort of queen in Clementina’s eyes, and her happiness a thing whereon to muse and ponder.

She pictured it all to herself ; conjured up the past ; wondered where the two had first met, and what the effect of each had been on the other ; drew in her mind’s eye a portrait of that conjunction of the brave, manly soldier and the bewitching maid. How delightful ! how romantic ! He, mute, confounded, adoring ; she, transported and enthralled ! A—h ! delicious !

Could she now but steal one glance—only one glance,—have but one actual vision whereon to base fresh castles in the air ? No, not yet ; she could not go to King’s Common yet, and it was at King’s Common only that the

enchancing play was going on. But Jack could go, and Jack must and should,—and it was this reflection, still more than the fact that it was the day after the funeral, which induced the question, “Are you not going to call on the Liscards?”

After a time Jack looked round.

“What did you say about the Liscards?” inquired he, absently. “You were not thinking of going there, were you?”

“No, not I; but you. I could not go yet; but they will expect you.”

“Who will expect me? Whom am I to ask for?”

“Rosamund, of course.”

“And suppose Major Gilbert is there?”

“Which he is certain to be. Well?”

“I should feel foolish. It is not pleasant to have wound yourself up to perform a duty, and——”

“Wound yourself up! But why ‘wound up’? What is there about an ordinary call at King’s Common to——”

"This is not an ordinary call."

"You need not say anything."

"Of course I shall not say anything. But still——. However, I shall have to go, I suppose. You don't think I could ask for Mr Liscard?"

"He would never see you."

"Just what I hoped."

"Then you would have to ask for Rosamund after all."

There was no escape for him ; and as he had none of his sister's desire to know whether or not engaged people looked and behaved like ordinary mortals, it was certainly hard that she could not have gone in his stead. But this could not be. Rosamund had never made a friend of Clementina, and had, indeed, opened wide her eyes at the bare suggestion.

"Would not Miss Stoneby be better than the Waterfields?" Hartland had put forth on one occasion.

She had laughed outright.

"Your mother would not see it?"

She had nodded.

“Not good enough, eh?”

Not “good” at all, according to Lady Caroline’s ideas of “goodness,” he had been enlightened. What? People who could not tell to what family they belonged, or, indeed, if they belonged to any family at all? Could it be supposed that a Miss Stoneby, who might be a Miss Anybody, could possibly consort, that was to say consort in any but the slightest and most superficial manner, with a daughter of Lady Caroline Liscard?

All of this in Rosamund’s best sarcasm. But she had presently dropped it, and spoken like herself.

“At the same time, Hartland, it is not altogether mamma; I own I am not drawn to swear a friendship with Clemmy Stoneby on my own account. My soul does not knit itself to hers. I do not dislike her—oh no. I see her to be good, and amiable, and busy, and useful—but——.”

“Come on,” said he. “But——?”

“She is so very, very old,” said Rosamund, seriously.

“Old? She is not twenty-one——.”

“Oh, I know—not in that way old; not in age—but she never, *never* could have been a girl like me. She never could have got into scrapes, and muddles, and all the rest of the hot water—now, could she, Hartland? I can never think of her—no, not if I think of her at two feet high—but as engaging servants, adding up accounts, paying her weekly bills with her little basket on her arm, inquiring after absentees from her Sunday-class, and being bobbed to by a dozen in a row, whenever she stops to admonish one. If I do but walk half a mile with her, it is, ‘Oh, just let me look in here,’ or ‘I just want to run in there,’ at every cottage-door we pass; and all with so business-like and competent an air, that I feel as if she had been ages and ages going in and out of cottages, and bustling along the rectory road.”

“You have hit her off, undoubtedly.”

“ With a little round bonnet just fitting her face.”

“ I know it.”

“ And woollen mittens over her gloves, because of her chilblains.”

“ True to life. Both mittens and chilblains.”

“ And it does make a person old never to be young, Hartland ? ”

“ I daresay.”

“ You ‘daresay.’ Well, I do call it hard to be ‘daresayed’ at after all. Can you not think of something to say, not to ‘dare’ to say? Can’t you suggest something, anything on the other side ? ”

But he had been wise enough not to do this. Unopposed she was nearly certain to work out for herself the neglected argument, whereas contradiction would have scattered it to the winds. Oh, if others could but have understood that wilful nature as well !

It did not surprise the young man at all to find a kinder and friendlier feeling towards his *protégées* spring up after this encounter.

At King's Common the brother and sister were looked upon as his *protégées*, and had the two both been men, they would have been held in excellent favour in consequence; but, as we have said, Lady Caroline held that plain and dowdy, or fair and fine, a young woman was still a young woman, and that Hartland was just a little too often over at the rectory.

In consequence, the Stonebys had never advanced in intimacy, and Mr Liscard's occasional “I wonder why we don't see more of the rector,” had led to no results. They were now to come to the front by force of circumstances.

To every person, as to everything under the sun, there is a season—a time when, for the nonce, he or she attains an elevation and importance, even though it be of an artificial or an evanescent nature, and the mere shuffling of the cards in everyday existence, at times throws up the hidden ones to the surface.

Thus it was now the Stonebys' hour.

The visit reluctantly undertaken by the brother, and anxiously urged by the sister,

proved such a success that he could not but go again when pressed by all to do so. He went the next day, and the next ; and when he took Clementina also on the second occasion, the two were quite hailed in by the servants, who had marked how willingly any diversion was received in the great, dreary drawing-room of the mourning mansion.

That Major Gilbert was already there with Miss Rosamund was nothing ; he had come over early and been with her most of the day : added to which, if the lovers had cared about being interrupted, they would not have been sitting in an apartment into which any one might walk at any moment. There they were known to be when the door-bell rang, and there the visitors were forthwith ushered in.

Gilbert, it appeared, was quite at home. Instead of the uneasy attitudes and restless movements which he had been wont to exhibit in that chamber of horrors, and instead of sitting edgeways on the formal central ottoman full in the draught betwixt two doors, he now

either lolled easily on Lady Caroline's own couch by the fire, or exchanged it for the broad, low, pillowed arm - chair which Mr Liscard still claimed in the evening.

On the entrance of Mr Stoneby and his sister, he rose, with an air of rising to do the honours, met them half-way, poked the fire, pressed them to draw within the precincts, moved a table out of Clementina's way, and finally subsided again into the low chair, laid his head back, crossed his legs, and twirled his watch-chain. Ease and intimacy could not have been carried to a finer pitch.

“Chilly to-day,” he observed presently, with a comfortable yawn. “We have got into ‘chill October’ at last, and no mistake. How the leaves are dropping!”

“But there is so much evergreen to be seen from this window that the dropping leaves are scarcely observable,” replied Miss Stoneby.

“Oh, ain't they, though?” rejoined Gilbert. “When I came up by one of the garden-paths this morning, I could hardly find my

way. Give you my word, I lost it ever so often."

"You came through the woods, I suppose?"

"I did—more fool I! Never saw such mud in my life. Though I turned up my trousers—and, by George! I've forgotten to turn them down again!" and he did it before her very eyes.

("What a very——" but the lady hesitated to know what adjective to use. Instinctively she glanced at Rosamund, but Rosamund was busily talking, and saw nothing. "Dear me! I hope he is a well-mannered man," reflected Clementina, rather doubtfully.)

Then Gilbert yawned again, turned his head round on the chair-pillow, and addressed his betrothed.

"Rosamund, I thought you would like to see some letters I am expecting by the second post, so I told Netley to send over one of his men to the barracks about now. My servant will give them to him."

But Rosamund was still talking to Mr Stoneby.

“Two posts a-day are a nuisance, to my mind,” continued the speaker (for, a dozen years ago, few rural neighbourhoods had their second post): “I, for one, could do jolly well without dose number two in one day; could not you, Miss Stoneby?”

“I must confess I always go or send for mine,” owned she. “We do not have them delivered; but we can get our afternoon letters by sending to the post-office. Most of my interesting letters come in the afternoon.”

“Ah, that’s always the way with you ladies!” cried the jocose ladies’ man,—“always on the look-out for ‘interesting’ letters. Now, what do you call an ‘interesting’ letter, eh? Tell me now,” he went on, familiarly; “four sheets long, and crammed to the throat, eh? Is that your idea of an ‘interesting’ letter, Miss Stoneby? I wonder, Rosamund, are my letters ‘interesting’ enough for you?” and again he turned indolently round on the pillow.

He could not, it was true, see her face; but

it was strange that he had not begun to mark when that silence fell between them, and what it meant; that he had not begun to suspect something wrong, when she was deaf and dumb to his sprightliness. If he could only have known! Only have heard a warning note! Only have dreamed that she was awakening, and that to one of her mood such an awakening was doom!

There was now no one to accuse him, none from whom to shelter him, and, alas! none to hold him in any sort of check. Daily she struggled with the light which was stealing in upon her; thrust it back, shut it out, closed her eyes, and all in vain. Could it—could it—*could* it be that others had been right after all? That those against whose injustice and narrow-mindedness she had revolted, whose littleness she had despised, and to whom she had felt herself so superior, had been nearer to the truth than herself! Nay, impossible. She would not give in to such a fancy.

Oh no; it was, she told herself, only that

she was grieving to have gone against her poor dead mother's wishes, and was unable to forget that the two had bidden each other a last “ Good night,” that “ Good night ” which had been a farewell for evermore, with mutual coldness. No word of regret had passed the daughter's lips, no syllable of affection the parent's. A stony kiss, a bald “ Adieu ”—and the two had parted, never more to meet.

In her agony of remorse, the one left had now none to turn to.

To her lover naturally could no hint be dropped ; and how be loyal to him, and yet seek other sympathy ?

In her first burst of indignation, Lady Caroline had used words and epithets which had burned themselves in as fire on her child's heart ; and although later, in the exuberance of spirits which had been mistaken for happiness, the generous Rosamund (with whose nature, faulty as it was, nothing mean nor petty ever had to do) had striven to obliterate the remembrance, it had, as we know, been

stirred up afresh by her mother's demeanour throughout the evening. At its close she had been quite as angry with Lady Caroline, as Lady Caroline had been with her, and had proudly maintained the justice of her resentment.

The next morning she had been called in to see the lifeless clay in its hushed and shrouded chamber of death,—and what wonder if, even upon that day, the first faint glimmerings of reaction had been felt towards the lover who had caused her this new and almost intolerable anguish ?

These now stole on apace.

“ Would you not be glad of a cup of tea after your walk, Miss Stoneby ? ” came in Major Gilbert's loud, brisk voice across the hearth—he had never attempted to modulate his accents nor compose his countenance after the first day or two—“ tea can never come in too early on a raw, cold day like this ; and though it is only a little past four, what do you say, Rosamund, shall I ring, and hurry up the tea ? ”

Now if there had been one thing on earth as to which Lady Caroline had been more inflexible than another, it had been having everything at King's Common done by rule. Breakfast, luncheon, dinner, and even the cosy little five-o'clock meal, had been for years served at precisely the same hour, and to “hurry up” anything was not in the household code.

Against this code had the fair Rosamund many a time and oft rebelled. “Why are we so stiff and precise? Why do we not have nice, little, merry, informal ways like other people?” she had been wont to cry out; and during that brief heyday when all were bowing down before the gay, glad young empress, there had been actual and perceptible symptoms of giving way in this as in other respects. But then all too soon had come the admirer, the lover, the new theme for thought, and matter for contest—and lesser and more trifling grievances had been overlooked, and let go.

It did seem now as if it were hardly his place, the place of one so recently admitted to the bosom of the family—and moreover admitted, as was ever present to her remembrance, by the very skin of his teeth—to overturn the old established habits of the house, which from time immemorial had been as the laws of the Medes and Persians. His hand was already on the bell: he was looking carelessly towards her, and her eye, turned at last perforce his way, was furthermore fretted by the up-turned corner of the handsome hearth-rug, rolled up beneath the chair which he had dragged towards the bell. To her view the action was slovenly, disrespectful, negligent. She could not forget that this was Clementina's first visit to the house of mourning, and that none knew better than Miss Stoneby what manners had been wont to prevail in Lady Caroline's drawing-room.

"Pray don't," she exclaimed, stung to sharpness by the thought.

“Eh?” exclaimed Gilbert, dropping the bell-handle.

“I am sure Clementina is in no hurry,” continued Rosamund, turning to her with gentler address, but still with the heightened colour in her cheek. “It is so kind of you both to come, that we hope you will stay for a good long visit. The tea will appear at its proper time, Frederick,” in a tone which Frederick had begun to hear of late.

“Oh, as you like, of course,” said he, pushing back the chair. “I only thought we should all be equally glad of it. And what’s a cup of tea?” he went on, with a little laugh not quite pleasant to hear. “At my father’s you can ring up a cup of tea at any hour of the day or night. Tea should never be a set thing, to my mind.”

“It is a set thing here,” said Miss Liscard.

“So I see; the very reason you should break down the idea. It is great nonsense.”

“Being the idea, however, and having always been so——” then Rosamund recol-

lected herself. "I do not wish to alter anything that used to be," she added, more gently. "Even the servants would think it strangely soon."

"Those servants of yours are a pampered lot," observed Gilbert, who felt that he had been snubbed almost as in the days of the *blue gown*. "It seems to me they have it all their own way in this house. I met one of the maids driving off to Longminster in the dogcart. Positively, being driven off by William in the dogcart, as cock-a-hoop as possible. I should have thought that in such a very particular household as this, such a thing would hardly—but I suppose there may be some explanation?"

If there were, it was not for him.

He received none, and might have known he should receive none.

Once before he had spied upon the household, and had told a tale which had been proved to be perfectly true, and vastly unpleasant.

Rosamund had had to own that it had been well the misdemeanour had been brought to light, but neither she nor Mrs Ossory had thanked the person who had shown it up. The young mistress had indeed been even more annoyed than the old housekeeper, and had almost shown her lover that he would do well to keep his eyes and his ears for other uses.

Who wanted to be cognisant of every single thing, whether right or wrong, that went on in the back-yard or the garden?

Things had always got along somehow, without the need for prying and peering.

He, on his part, had expressed surprise and disapproval of the system prevailing at King's Common; and had emphatically advocated the need of a master's supervision, even to the lowest details, in the affairs of stable, or kennel,—while he had exclaimed “Good Lord!” a dozen times when informed that Lady Caroline had only interviewed Mrs Ossory twice in the week, and no one else at all.

“A pretty housekeeper you’ll make, you little piece of ignorance,” he had cried merrily. “I know how it will be. I can hear you already ordering in legs of beef and steaks of mutton! Never mind. I can stand it. I shan’t be hard upon you. And you must take lessons from my old mother, when we go there. I shall put you under her wing for a bit. She is a rare good hand, is my old ma; and would enjoy teaching you of all things. Lord! she would go clucking about like a hen with one chick; for the girls have got beyond her already, and think they know as much as she does; so she complains she has nobody to take in hand, poor old thing! It will be famous for her to have you trotting at her heels, Rosamund.”

Unluckily Rosamund had not felt that it would be quite so famous, nor that the programme altogether was likely to be so felicitously carried out as planned. She had not seen herself trotting at Mrs Gilbert’s heels, nor dutifully drinking in her instructions.

And what was worse, she had not liked the tone in which her lover had commented on her dead mother's habits and rules. It had not mattered that he should think herself ignorant and untrained; but he should—yes, he certainly should—have forborne to meddle with what Lady Caroline had done, or been.

It had been a different thing altogether her complaining to him—although she now devoutly wished she had never done so; but still, she could not help feeling that she should not have been taken advantage of,—and that this advantage Major Gilbert had taken.

She had poured out to him, in the first warm burst of confidence, all that had been uncongenial and distasteful in her past life—even before her engagement, she had allowed herself to hint at much as to which her lips should have been sealed; and the result had been that Gilbert knew a great deal more than he need have known, and was not the man to let the knowledge lie fallow.

Neither would he now perceive that it was not his place to comment.

If he saw a neglect, or omission—and what did he not see? he rarely came to the house without having observed something or met some one—he never dreamed of holding his tongue. It would be—“By the way, I ran against So-and-so somewhere”—where So-and-so had most likely no business to be; or, “What was Such-another-one doing somewhere else?” with a shrewd idea that the said Such-an-one was not about anything strictly within his own line of duty.

On these occasions Rosamund would, according to her mood, either lightly let the inquiry pass, or answer that if there were any complaint to be made, she should have it through Mrs Ossory, or Netley, or Thunder. Only through the medium of these functionaries had rule and justice ever been administered at King's Common, and only through them did she mean to continue to administer it.

“As long as you are mistress here,” she had

been reminded ; but she had not always smiled at the reminder, and the hint conveyed.

Alas ! she had begun to be ashamed of him, and every little straw floating upon the new current of her thoughts seemed to bend in the same direction.

“I will go and let papa know Mr Stoneby is here ;” and she now rose hastily, thinking as she did so, “If papa either joins us in here or fetches Jack away, it will at least break up the party, and force Frederick out of that chair.” She had almost grown to hate the conjunction of Major Gilbert and her father’s chair. “He always shows off at his worst in it,” she now concluded.

As foreseen, Mr Stoneby was sent for to the library, and heartily welcomed there. In truth, he had never found his host more mildly cheerful. The widower had felt that by this time he might venture to unpack the box of new books which had arrived the night previous to Lady Caroline’s demise, and upon which his yearning vision had ever since been

cast. He was now having a delightful afternoon sorting and arranging, and the presence of a scholarly and congenial assistant was particularly appropriate; the rector's call could not have been better timed, and the two were immediately engrossed, and disposed of for the time being.

But Rosamund did not all at once return to the drawing-room. "They can get on very well without me," she murmured, half aloud, as she stole up-stairs to solitude and reverie. "Oh dear, dear! how is it that I, too, can get on so well without them—or is it, him? It must be my own fault. I am so pettish, so womanish with him; no man could like it. I have lived so long in this one spot, that I worry if poor Frederick does but ring a bell, or give a message unlike one that I, or any of us, would have given. How absurd I am! Silly—ridiculous—prudish. And I who stood up for him so bravely once! And it was but the other day that Hartland praised me to Aunt Julia for being above trifling prejudices!

If he could hear me now, he would change his tune. I am as bad—I am worse than them all put together! It is not Frederick who is changed—at least I do not think he is changed, though certainly he is easier and more—I don’t know what; more inclined to loll about, and kick out his feet, and use his—his handkerchief and his toothpick. Oh, what would mamma have thought if she had seen him bring out his toothpick! He scarcely ventured to breathe or move when she was by, looking at him as she used to look; but I think when away from her, that he would always have been—been—I don’t know what. He certainly is more free than most people in his way of speaking and bantering, and calling by name. He is wonderfully soon at home with strangers. I suppose it is his frankness. I suppose there is no harm in it. I liked it once: surely I cannot now be going to mind the very thing that pleased me so much that first afternoon we met—his singling me out, and making much of me, and saying ‘Good-bye’ as if we

had known each other all our lives. I thought it quite delightful of him—though I do not think Mrs Waterfield did. I know it was soon afterwards that I heard her tell mamma he was much too familiar; and how angry I was! Well, when we are married I must give him one or two little hints. But I wish—oh, how I wish that till then I could hold my tongue! I know it is not for me to speak, only when he *will* say the very thing he should not—pshaw! who cares? I won't, whoever does. No, I won't; so, Aunt Julia, you need not expect any relenting in that quarter, my dear auntie. She will soon like Frederick; she likes everybody, the good soul. Hartland likes him—I *think*. All the children like him. And the very servants, though he watches and reports them, like him in their way. Oh, I am all right—I am all right,” and giving herself no time for more, she went swiftly down again to the drawing-room.

And it had grown more cheerful there. The log-fire was blazing brightly, as though to defy

the mists outside ; and Gilbert, who had missed her, and had thought he had vexed her, and was really in love, poor fellow, came anxiously—and not too demonstratively—forward, drew up her chair, but did not take his wonted possession of it and her—and altogether made just enough, and not too much, commotion ; so that she could not help cheering up, and the fit of the blues vanished—for that time.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CAGED BIRD.

“Oh, what could it grieve for? Its feet were tied
 With a silken thread of my own hands’ weaving.”
 —KEATS.

“WHAT do you say to having the girls here?”

The suggestion was Gilbert’s, and it was made after six weeks’ experience of King’s Common as a house of mourning.

For himself he was not dull: he had his military duties at Longminster to look after; his engagement and the family bereavement to announce; and Rosamund to make love to, and give presents to; but he fancied—perhaps justly—that she was not having quite so good a time.

The novelty of the situation had worn off,

and it was no longer strange and dismal to her to behold the hatchment over the portico, and the black hangings in the family pew ; it no longer seemed a liberty to touch any of what had been Lady Caroline's particular environments, to head the table at meals, and give the signal to rise after dinner. Mr Liscard had resumed his wonted habits, and, as before, pursued his own path ; while the lawyer and the steward transacted between them such business as had formerly fallen to his wife's share. Miss Penrose had recommenced lessons and rules ; all—with one exception—had fallen back, more or less, into the old groove, with a diffidence of the new, natural under the circumstances,—all but Rosamund, and for her everything was changed.

She was now not only mistress of her father's household, but prospective mistress of another, and had thus to take up two positions at once.

But although the future was surcharged with importance and variety, it seemed that, for the present, there was nothing wherewith

to while away the tedious hours. As soon as all the black-edged epistles had been responded to, and the dressmakers and milliners had executed their final orders, nothing remained which could very well, according to her views, be put forward and turned into an occupation. By nature, as we know, she was neither intellectual, nor possessed with a turn for any of the fine arts; and although by no means deficient either in wit or sense, these hardly stood her in much stead at this pinch.

Society was out of the question; her old friends the Waterfields, who indeed might have been admitted to intercourse, were absent from home; Lady Julia was obliged to be careful of cold winds, and was, moreover, apt to look wistful and let fall inconvenient remarks; the Stonebys—she soon came to an end of the Stonebys,—so that, all said and done, Major Gilbert himself was the only resource of his betrothed, and it is to be feared she did not find him a sufficient one.

He was very kind; he had invariably pro-

vided something wherewith to amuse and enliven her, when he came boldly tramping in at the door, ringing no bell, but admitting himself as a man who has a right to do so. As invariably, he had brought with him a fresh colour, and a fine appetite—the rewards of exercise and health. Usually he walked at this time, one of his horses being laid up; and knowing Rosamund to be also a walker, he did not like to find her sitting over the fire on a fine, breezy afternoon, in a room warmer than was wholesome, and with a book she laid aside but languidly on his entrance.

He thought she did not go out enough, did not run about enough. He remembered her as running in and out of the garden door all day long.

The weather was not tempting perhaps, but there were days when a good run and a blow in the soft south wind would have done her all the good in the world—and it transpired that on these she had not set a foot outside! She had been afraid it was going to rain.

Had he known Rosamund of old, he would have been still more surprised than he was. She who had snapped her fingers at water-spouts, to be daunted by the chance of a shower!

He saw enough as it was, however, to fancy she wanted a shaking up, and the happy idea forthwith presented itself of providing a treat for Emily and Henrietta, and at the same time giving his fair one something to do and to think about.

“What do you say to having the girls here?”

“The girls?”

“Em and Etta. I daresay they would come. They are longing to know you. And just now, when the house is quiet, and nothing going on, you would get to know each other a long way better than at another time. What do you think?”

“Oh, I think—yes, I think I should be very glad.” It was not exactly hearty, but it was as much so as he had expected. Rosa-

mund had not been hearty about anything of late. "If my father has no objection," proceeded she; "and of course they would understand that we can have no amusement for them."

"Of course. I should say they would prefer it. They are lively girls themselves, and need no entertaining. Oh, they would be happy enough."

"Then I will ask papa, and write at once."

"Oh, no hurry, wait till we have had our chat;" and he drew near, affectionately, for he had just arrived.

"If I do not write now, I shall be too late for the post."

"I forgot. That alters the case. Well, if you are as keen as all that,——" and he strove to be pleased that it was so, and easily persuaded himself that it was merely a renewal of her girlish ardour, and no desire to escape from his embraces, which sent Rosamund so quickly out of the room. She was some time in coming back, but excused herself by pro-

ducing the note already written, and inquiring, prettily, whether it were worded as he liked. Would it do?

Yes, it would do very well; ye—es—turning over the page again; very well, on the whole; it was, perhaps, just the least bit in the world formal; but after all—oh, it would do nicely, and it was very kind of her and her father, and the girls would be immensely pleased.

“How soon do you think they will come?” She was beginning to feel really a little pleased and curious herself, and was not sorry to have something—anything—to look forward to.

“What day did you ask them for? I forget. Did you name a day?”

“No. I said the first that was convenient. This is Tuesday. Perhaps about Friday?”

“I hardly think Friday,” said Gilbert, who had his own reasons for saying so. “We’ll call it Monday. I’ll just scratch a line myself,” and he sat down again at the now neglected davenport, and wrote a hasty despatch.

Which was just like him, all at home declared. For it was to the effect that "the girls" were to be sure to come, but they were to be equally sure not to come one day sooner than that for which they could be fully and suitably equipped at all points. If they wanted frocks and hats, and fal-lals, they were to get them straightway, and he would see that the bill was paid; all he bargained for was that the young ladies, when they did appear, should do him credit. There were also several considerate suggestions, which the prompt and clear-headed brother had thought out in the interval between making the proposal, and Rosamund's return with it carried out; and finally, he promised to meet their train and go with them up to the house.

As he had foreseen and foreordained, a joyful acceptation was speedily received, and Monday was the appointed day. But unfortunately, when the Monday came, there came with it some military business which brooked of no delay, and which could only be trans-

acted, as ill-luck would have it, during the very hour at which the sisters' train was due. He had no time to let them know; he did not know himself till after they must have started on their journey.

"Poor things! I am really sorry about it," he considered. "I know they will be in a blue funk. And it would have taken off the edge, if I could have gone up with them. But it can't be helped. I shall get over to King's Common as soon as possible; and after all, they may thank their stars they have only to encounter Rosamund—not Rosamund's mother." . . .

"Emily, he is not here."

An anxious face looked up and down the station platform, when the long train from London pulled up that afternoon about four o'clock. "Frederick is not here," exclaimed Henrietta Gilbert, in accents almost tragic. "And he promised faithfully, and he knew how we should feel! I did think——"

"'Sh," murmured Emily back. Her eye

had caught sight of a tall footman lugubriously corded, and instinct told her whom it was this functionary sought. "I suppose Rosamund is outside," added she, "and has sent him in for us."

Half of the conjecture, and half only, proved correct. The footman was for them, but Miss Liscard was not outside. Miss Liscard would explain herself what had detained her. Then it became evident that the man was looking for a maid. He had taken the young ladies' bags and rugs ; but it was not until Miss Gilbert herself volunteered to point out their luggage, that he desisted from further quest.

"Did he think there were more of us?" inquired Henrietta, aside.

But she was nudged to silence, and neither spoke again till they were safe within the large, roomy omnibus which was used for station work at King's Common.

"Well, here we are at last!" cried Etta, then. "Here we are, and here we go! Really and truly we are now to make this grand visit

we have talked so much about. If only Frederick had been with us now, I should feel perfectly happy. I can hardly yet believe it: I keep thinking all the while that something or other will be sure to turn up to stop us. Every morning lately I have expected a letter saying that some one else had died——”

——“Do take care.”

“Oh, I shall take care, never fear. I shall be as quiet as a mouse as soon as ever we get there. Directly the smallest corner of the house comes in sight, my heart will sink down into my boots, just as it did at the station. That footman gave me a turn, and—I wonder how far we have to drive?”

“I am afraid not far.”

“Why? How do you know?”

“I remember Frederick said about two miles.”

“Only two miles! Oh dear, we shall take no time over two miles at this rate! I wish it had been ten.”

“I am sure I don’t,” said Emily, who was

more courageous. "I am tired with sitting still so long already ; and now that there is no Lady Caroline, there is nothing really to mind."

"Oh, isn't there, though ? If there *had* been a Lady Caroline, I do not believe I should ever have come."

"Perhaps we should never have been asked—except, of course, to the wedding."

"I almost wish we had not been. We could have got on famously at the wedding. We should have been driven up, for one thing, together with a lot of others—not all by ourselves in state, like this. The carriage would not have been sent only for us, and that great footman would not have discovered we had no maid. Emily, why didn't we bring one of the housemaids ?"

"We never did such a thing before," said Emily. "I never once thought of it. And I know plenty of girls don't," added she, "though I suppose some do. And after all, Etta," with a touch of sound sense, "what good would it have done, when the very first

thing that would have come out among the servants would have been that she was not a real maid? We have never been fine people. Why should we begin to pretend?"

"Emily, only think what it would have been had we been going to face Lady Caroline now! As it is, this is only a girl of our own age—younger, really—and Frederick says she is most anxious to be friends, and that we must make friends of her, and draw her out. He seems to think she rather needs drawing out—what? What is it?"

"I see the lodge," said Emily, in a low, quavering voice.

"O——h!"

"Don't hold me so. It will do no good."

"Oh dear—dear—dear! Oh, how I wish it were over!"

"So do I. Never mind. It will be over in a few minutes."

They drove in through the great gates, and then on for some time, between rows of half-denuded beeches.

"I don't see the house anywhere," observed Emily at length.

"Could that have been the lodge, then?" debated her sister, for they were not accustomed to long avenues. "Oh, Em," cried she, the next minute, "do look! Look at the deer, look at that beautiful park, look at——"

"I see. Do be quiet. Don't shout like that, or the men will hear you. Frederick told us about the deer-park, don't you remember? Etta, is my hair tidy behind? Do tell me. Don't say 'yes' without looking."

"Quite," said Etta, after a hasty glance. "Am I right too? I suppose Frederick is sure to be here, at any rate. It will be such a comfort to have him. Oh, when will that house come?—and yet every moment I wish it farther off."

Emily was silent, too miserable for speech.

"If it would only come," moaned Etta, who, on the contrary, found relief in sighs. "Come, and be gone, and the whole thing

over, and we comfortably in our rooms upstairs, unpacking. I would give anything to have the next half-hour safely done with. What are we stopping for?"

For although there was no house, no gate, no hindrance of any sort visible, the coachman was drawing rein, and the next moment the nimble footman was on the ground, the carriage-door was being opened, and the loveliest face in the world appeared beside it.

Ere either occupant could draw a breath, the formidable meeting was over, and had been shorn of all its terrors.

"I thought I should catch you here," said Rosamund's pleasant young voice, which had such a sweet, reedy thrill about it, that even Emily and Henrietta felt the charm at once.

"I could not come down," she added, stepping inside, and taking each by the hand, "because we had an escapade in our stables, and I had to borrow my aunt's horses, and all the arrangements having to be made at

the last moment, no one told me how it had been settled till too late. That is a very good train, the one you came by. It is our best train in the day. We are very much behind the rest of the world in the matter of trains, but we do boast one good one. Did you have a pleasant journey? Was it very wet?"

All the time she was thinking faster and faster. ("They are very good-looking. They are handsomely dressed. They seem dreadfully shy. I wonder what they think of me?")

"We shall be there directly," she ran on. "There are the stables, and the garden walk. That is the tallest poplar in the county. There are my little sisters, just let loose from lessons."

"Is my brother here?" inquired Emily Gilbert, at last. It was the only question for which she could find voice.

"I don't know. He may be somewhere about," replied Rosamund, carelessly. "If you are not tired we might take a stroll

after tea. It is fine to-day, but what weeks and weeks of rain we have had."

"Frederick told us it had been very wet," observed Henrietta, with effort number two. "This is rather a wet place, is it not?"

Here her sister frowned. ("A wet place," muttered Emily to herself, "as if anybody liked to be supposed to live in a wet place! Stupid thing.")

Rosamund, however, appeared readily to coincide.

"Wet is not the word," she said; "we have been dripping for the last month. It has been unutterably, hopelessly miserable, day after day;" and in her tone there was no trace that sunshine within had banished gloom without.

"Poor thing! how unhappy she has been!" thought the good-natured pair, and felt all at once more at home with her than they had done before; and they dismounted the steps, and followed Rosamund across the hall, and through the ante-room—so often

trod by Frederick, and so vividly described by him—feeling much less alarmed than they had ever dared hope to be.

Still the youthful hostess had to keep the talk in her own hands. Careless and girlish, she chattered on, perceiving how ill at ease were her guests in spite of all; and at length so obvious did it become that she was bearing all the burden, that each sister began in her heart to upbraid the other. (“Etta can rattle on against any one,” reflected the aggrieved Emily, “yet there she sits now, as if butter would not melt in her mouth!”)

(“Emily told me I was not to speak, but to let her take the lead; and now, why doesn’t she take the lead?” internally burned the no less outraged Henrietta.)

Each looked with undisguised eagerness for any signs of the burly Frederick, their protector and referee-in-ordinary—scanning every apartment for his hat, his gloves, tumbled pillows, chairs out of place, all the

divers signs by which his presence was made known at home,—but nothing was visible.

“I suppose my brother has been detained,” at last observed Emily anew, as though the subject could not but be one of interest.

“Possibly,” said Rosamund. “Will you take off your hat? And you too?” to Henrietta. “Throw them down here,” throwing down her own. “Do you take sugar? No? Hardly anybody takes sugar in tea now. I do. I take quantities. But I do wonder at any one’s liking coffee without.”

“I like coffee without,” acknowledged Etta, almost as if it were a crime, “and,” brightening up, “so does Frederick.”

“You never take sugar in anything then?”

“Oh yes, I do, and Frederick is as fond of sweet things as I am; but not in coffee. You should see his plate at dessert, all heaped up, and——”

“Yes, really,” drawled Miss Liscard, absently. “How brightly the sun has come out! No salt with your brown bread and

butter? Really? It appears I am alone both in my sugar and my salt. We have not found much in common yet, have we?"

It certainly appeared as if they had not found Frederick in common. There was no response to his name, no interest in his tastes, no knowledge of his whereabouts; and whereas on every other topic the pretty tea-maker appeared ready to prattle sweetly, to each allusion to her lover she was deaf. Only when this became observable, did the sisters experience any recurrence of that terrible *arrival* feeling known too well to the young and shy. They had now got over the worst. They had surmounted the station, the front door, the being ushered—as might have been—into a great unknown presence-chamber, whose depths might disclose anything—the tea, and that without any presiding elder in a big arm-chair—but what was to come next?

Ought they not now to ascend solemnly to their room and their trunks, begin to lay out dresses, hang up cloaks, find snug nooks

for hats and bonnets? Ought they not, in their mother's homely phraseology, to be "shaking themselves out," and getting into their quarters generally?

But here was Rosamund putting on her hat, and talking anew about a stroll in the garden, as if they had nothing else in the world to do!

"I—I—perhaps we had better unpack first," suggested the elder Miss Gilbert, for the case, to her eyes, was desperate. "We have a good deal to take out——"

"You did not bring a maid? Oh, send the key to mine, and she will put out everything."

"Thank you very much," replied Emily, doubtfully, "but I should hardly like to trouble her."

"Em always looks after us both," chimed in Etta.

"Still, perhaps—as the evening is turning out so fine——" said Emily,—“if——”

——“The key, then, the key,” cried Rosa-

mund, merrily. "Throw clothes, and trunks, and all of it to the winds. I always do. Here," holding out a beckoning hand with peremptory archness,—“here, yield up the apple of discord, the bone of contention—the——”

She stopped short, her hand fell, and the sparkle died out of her eyes. “I did not expect you so soon,” continued the same voice, but strangely altered, to some one behind the group.

But in the shout of welcome from the other two, this passed. There was a simultaneous cry of “Frederick!” and with one accord both Em and Etta sprang upon him.

“Frederick! Oh!” cried Emily, with a burst of relief and joy. “Oh, Frederick!” She had no further words.

“You were not at the station, and so we thought we should find you here, and when you were not here, we wondered what ever had become of you, and if we had gone out—and we were just going out—we should have missed you again,” cried her sister, letting

out in one brief half-minute all the dammed-up volubility of the past hour. "When did you come? How did we not hear you? What kept you? Em said she thought——"

"Shut up, you chatterbox," said Frederick, good-humouredly. "I say, Rosamund, has she been putting on the steam like this ever since she came? How are you to-day, eh?" when at last he was allowed to make his way to her. "You looked pretty bright when I came in. What was it all about, eh?"

"The key of your sister's portmanteau." There was no brightness now, however.

"And they wouldn't give it up? Wanted no one to rummage about among their goods and chattels, I suppose. Well, here you are at last, you two," holding the sisters at arm's-length, and regarding them with such a look of affectionate approbation as compensated for all they had struggled through. "Three bonnie lasses; and, by Jove! I am the only man for you all! I say, Rosamund, we must get over Hartland for the girls. As he is a

lord, he ought to cut up into two, and let them go halves. Is he to be here to-night?"

"No."

"Humph! Well, I thought he might, that's all. He is here often enough, I am sure. Or at least he used to be," continued the speaker, "he has not been quite so much of late. I fancy he has taken to going the Stonebys' way. Oh, but we really cannot allow Hartland to throw himself away upon that little goody-goody, twopenny-halfpenny Clemmy Stoneby."

Rosamund made no reply. The other two laughed, and looked for more.

"Aunt Julia is not half sharp," proceeded Gilbert, bent upon showing himself one of the family; "she is a good creature——"

"We need not discuss my aunt, if you please," said a voice that would have done credit to Lady Caroline herself; "your sisters have not yet made her acquaintance."

"They will soon, though, I hope. You will take them over to the Abbey to-morrow,

I daresay? It will be a nice walk for you all, and the girls will like to see the place. They are as good as you at walking, Rosamund; they must start you again, for it strikes me you have been lazy of late. Of course there has been a reason," with a sudden turn to solemnity, "of course when there has been a death in a house—eh, what? Rosamund? Oh, she's off."

She was off. She could not endure more just then.

"Awfully sensitive, and all that, you know," nodded Gilbert, looking sagely after her. "Can't bear me even to speak of her mother; though, by George! I do my level best to speak civilly. I sail uncommonly near the wind, I can tell you. But Rosamund—well, Lady Caroline was her mother—and I suppose there's no more to be said. That sensitiveness is in the blood—and a great nuisance it is—but I ought to remember it. What do you think of her?"

On this point he could not but be satisfied;

they had been greatly struck both with Rosamund's beauty and her air, and testified to the frank and pleasant welcome she had bestowed on them. To be sure, she had awed them a little, but——

“All right,” said he, “I knew you would get on with her. Only remember the sensitiveness, you know;” and then the three drew together for a long, close, delightful confabulation, in which all were of one mind, and no one had any sensitiveness to beware of,—and it struck Em and Etta that even Frederick himself breathed more freely when out of the presence of his beautiful betrothed.

CHAPTER XX.

MAJOR GILBERT'S CASE.

“ She’s such a miser, too, in love,
 It’s joys she’ll neither share nor prove.
 Blushing at such inglorious reign,
 I sometimes strive to break my chain.

Ah, friend, ’tis but a short-lived trance
 Dispelled by one enchanting glance ;
 She need but look—and I confess,
 Her looks completely curse or bless.”

—SMOLLETT.

“ How ridiculous of her ! ” cried Henrietta, the moment the sisters were alone. “ I never knew anything more ridiculous in my life. As if *we* were anybody ! As if it could have mattered before *us* ! She had been as pleasant as possible up to the instant Frederick appeared ; and then, Emily, then did you notice what a change there was ? ”

“ No one could have helped noticing,” said

Emily, "and I must say I had thought Rosamund would have been above such affectation; but as Frederick did not seem to mind, it is not for us to pick holes."

"We don't pick the holes; we only see them when they are there. To begin to play off her airs directly a man was by! And it was not as if she could have supposed he would admire them, for at one time he was almost huffy himself."

"You mean about Lord Hartland?"

"Why, she quite snapped at him."

"Oh, not 'snapped,'" said Emily, with a swift perception that it would be out of keeping for an earl's granddaughter to 'snap'; "but Rosamund certainly did not like it. I wonder why, for Frederick said nothing she could have minded."

"She thinks this fine cousin of hers too good for us."

"Perhaps," Emily nodded thoughtfully. "Frederick said they made a great deal of him, as the head of the family."

“But we must see him and speak to him some time,” quoth Etta, recovering. “He will not keep away from the house because we are here. And I do think that if Rosamund is going to be ashamed of us——”

——“Hush! Nonsense! How you do run on! Who said Rosamund was going to be ashamed of us? Just because she coloured a little when Frederick jested about Lord Hartland cutting up into two——”

——“But why should he not? Why should Frederick not? Why——”

——“Why—why—why,” cried her sister, impatiently. “If you are going to say ‘why’ to everything you meet with here, it is a pity you came. How am I to tell the ‘why’ of things any more than yourself? Here we are, and we must make the best of it——”

“Make the best of it! And I thought we were going to be so happy and so comfortable, once we were safely in our own room, unpacking all our nice new things, and talking over everything!” cried poor Etta, almost in tears.

“I declare I don’t feel happy a bit. I wish I was at home again. I wish we had never come.”

“Rubbish ! Don’t be silly,” exhorted Emily, with a suspicious little choke in her own voice. “I suspect we are both a couple of simpletons. We feel rather out of it somehow in this great, big place, where everything is so stately and solemn, and so unlike our own ways at home ; besides, Frederick’s not meeting us at the station gave us the shivers, and we got upset ; and so, because he and Rosamund did not fall into each other’s arms——”

——“That was it, I daresay,” assented Etta, somewhat comforted. “And I am tired too, Em ; aren’t you ? And my head aches with that hot hat ; and then, though I drank the tea, I could not eat one atom of my bread and butter, and I have such a sinking inside me now. Yet it isn’t hunger. I don’t believe I shall be able to touch a morsel of dinner, unless—unless Rosamund is different.”

“She did give one cross look, I own.

But you know, Etta, every one says we are a good-natured family, and we don't understand cross looks. Oh, we may be quite sure, certain, positive, it is all right between them. Of course it is, or would he have looked so content and well satisfied? There, now; that settles the question. Now, Etta, roll up those empty papers and put them back into the basket, to be ready for the return journey, and we will begin to dress in earnest."

Dressing in earnest meant dressing speedily and satisfactorily. Accustomed to waiting on themselves, the sisters had refused all proffers of aid, and now arranged their own hair, selected their own ornaments, and fastened each other's frocks — and insensibly their spirits revived beneath the process.

It was a lovely autumnal evening, mild as summer, though the season was mid-November, and the balmy air came through their open windows long after darkness had settled down over the land, and had rendered candles imperative within; while the peaceful still-

ness of the hour was broken only by the tinkling of the sheep-bell, or the faint rumble of a solitary cart in the distance. To ears accustomed to the ceaseless hum of a suburban neighbourhood, whose nearest approach to silence was the cessation of near and dominant sounds, the absolute hush which at nightfall pervaded the precincts of the old country mansion, surrounded by its own woods and glades, and with a thinly peopled, far-stretching rural district beyond, was a new experience. The youthful strangers had never before imagined anything of the kind, and in the present bewildered state of their thoughts and feelings the repose of nature had a soothing and tranquillising influence.

“We must go down-stairs, I suppose,” said Emily at last, with a sigh. “I wish we could have stayed quietly here a little longer; but I suppose it would not be polite. I suppose it would hardly do. If we had anybody to tell us these things,—but as we have not, it is best to be on the safe side.”

“And I think I am quite ready for downstairs again,” responded her sister, cheerfully. “I feel brightened up; and I want to see all that is to be seen, and find out all that is going on, and get over our next meeting with Rosamund.”

It was got over sooner than she thought, and as unexpectedly as the first had been. They ran against a light figure on the staircase, and it appeared that while they were in all the glory of blue silk, smart sashes, embroidered slippers, brooches, bangles, and locket, Rosamund was still in her plain morning-dress, and was only now beginning to pull off her rough outer jacket, while her hat swung on her arm. All betokened haste and lateness. She had been out in the dusk, she explained hurriedly; had stayed later than she knew; was flying to dress now; would not be a minute; and would they go downstairs to the drawing-room, where there was sure to be some one, probably her next sisters Catharine and Dolly, who had been promoted

to appearing there, and would be so delighted? —and the end of the sentence was dropped from the banisters of the upper landing.

“There, she is all right again,” murmured Emily, much relieved. “I told you we were making mountains out of molehills. How pretty she looked! I daresay,” still lower,—“I daresay, Etta, she and Frederick——” and a pinch of the arm supplied the rest.

“O—h!” Down went Etta’s mouth, and up went her eyebrows: enlightenment could go no further. Sly Rosamund! Lucky Frederick! They knew what they were about after all, and—but behold! The next sight was Frederick himself, luxuriously stretched beside the drawing-room fire, in full evening dress, conning the paper with the air of a man who has had leisure for every portion of it, advertisements included, and who now laid it aside with the greatest alacrity.

“It’s you, is it? That’s right. I thought it could hardly be Rosamund; she’s not of the punctual sort. Well, now, let me look

at you. Ay, you'll do very well. I should say you are all right. Up to the mark. They dress a lot in these houses, or else perhaps"—with a shade of doubt—"perhaps you might seem a little overdone for just now. Rosamund, you see, can't put on anything but black, and I don't think she has a single black ornament."

"But she expects us to dress," said Etta. "She spoke of 'dressing for dinner' as if it were the usual thing."

"Of course. So it is. She dresses every evening of her life. All I mean is, that I wish you could have seen her in full fig for a ball, or as she looked that first day I dined here—the day we were engaged. By Jove! But she has never looked like it since, poor girl."

"She looked lovely just now," cried Etta, enthusiastically. "We met her on the stairs, and she looked so fresh and bright——"

"Ay, that's what she does, when she is at her best. But she needs the open air to set

up her colour. She was not in good face to-day ; she had not been out enough."

"She has just come in now."

"Just come in !—come in now ? My goodness ! do you mean that she has been out till now ? I thought she had been with you," cried he, in surprise and vexation. "I thought you had all been together unpacking. Has she never been near you ?"

"Indeed, yes. She came to us directly we went up-stairs—after we left you, when her maid called us, you remember," eagerly replied Emily. "She could not have been kinder ; only we wanted no help, and I think she saw that—that Etta and I would rather be alone. You know, Frederick, we are not used to visiting, especially at these great houses, and Rosamund seemed to understand exactly, and we thought it so kind of her to leave us a little to ourselves."

"That was it, was it ?" said he, mollified. "Oh, it is all right, if that was the way. Oh, I knew Rosamund would be kind, and

all that; but I want her to be friendly and chummy with you—what girls are with each other. She has often told me she never could be really thick with those prigs of Waterfields; and she don't take to Clementina Stoneby, the only other girl at hand, and so I thought she would be sure to hit it off with you two. I have no doubt she will, by-and-by."

"Oh yes," said Henrietta, cheerfully. "It doesn't take long to know us; and Em and I want to be friends above everything."

"Have you seen any of the young ones yet?"

"No. Rosamund thought some of them would be here."

"They were, but they made off. There was something or other on hand. They have not been with Rosamund either, then?"

They had not, for they came in at the moment, satisfactorily accounting for their departure, and eager to make acquaintance with the new-comers. Neither of the two possessed the beauty or grace of their elder

sister, and whether it were due to this cause or not, it is certain that the Miss Gilberts at once felt more at home with them,—the redness and sharpness of Catharine's arms, and the sadly vulgar cold in the head under which poor little Dolly was labouring, reducing them, it seemed, to any level.

Moreover, the plain black frocks had been made at home, and made to allow for growth : they neither fitted, nor had been meant to fit ; they were long and loose, and hideously unbecoming. At an age when every art is required to soften irregularities and shade defects, the straight, business-like, uncompromising breadths seemed as though they had sworn to conceal nothing and lend themselves to no illusions, and the effect on Emily and Henrietta was, as we have said, immediate and exhilarating.

They could at once proceed to interrogate names and ages after the approved fashion, and in less than five minutes Dolly was trying on Etta's bracelets, and Catharine was

waving Emily's fan, as if they had been acquainted all their lives.

Gilbert looked on approvingly. He was really fond of girls and boys, and had already, by timing well his applications, obtained for these two in particular, divers indulgences, which, to tell the truth, he desired almost as much for his own sake as theirs. To him they owed their freedom of this present hour; from him came boxes of chocolate-creams and other sweet things; through him and his engagement was opened up the brilliant prospect which formed the subject of their daily talks and nightly dreams. It followed that he was a favourite, and that his sisters would have been well received on that ground alone; but directly it became apparent that the grown-up misses, in their finery and trinkets, were ready to be friends with them, and did not condescend, nor—horror of horrors!—treat them as *little girls*, Catharine and Dolly were soon at home, and all the party were chattering gaily and loudly together when a quiet

step was heard within the doorway, and Mr Liscard, rather astonished by the unusual hilarity, appeared on the scene.

"My sisters, sir," said Gilbert, with something of a flourish. "This is Miss Gilbert; and this is Henrietta. You would never know which was the eldest if I did not tell you," he added, parenthetically.

"That means that papa will have to take the eldest in to dinner," explained Dolly, for the general benefit.

"Then I must dine too to take in the second," cried Catharine, seizing on the idea. "Do, Frederick, say that I must. Ask Rosamund when she comes in, won't you? Somebody must take you in," she added to the appreciative Etta; "and here am I, if Rosamund will only let me."

"Ask your papa," suggested Gilbert, who had found the wisdom of so doing in his own case.

"Papa, may I? Oh, papa, do say yes. May I go and tell them to lay a place for

me? Say yes, papa. *Please*, papa, be quick before Rosamund comes in. Is it 'Yes'? I know it is 'Yes,' and the usually placid and demure Catharine almost shook the coat-sleeve she held in her urgency.

Everybody laughed.

"You will have to give in, sir," said Major Gilbert, merrily; "you cannot possibly resist such an attack."

"Eh, what? But—but——" hesitated the poor widower, who well knew he was being imposed upon, and in what light a demand so audacious would have been looked upon in past days—"stop a minute. Wait till your sister comes down. Here she comes."

"Then all hope is over," muttered Catharine, letting the sleeve go. "I know she won't. Cross thing. She never lets us have any fun. She is worse even than—than it used to be," evading a more direct reference. "If I had only got papa to say 'Yes,' and had told Badeley——" But here she stopped in amazement.

Major Gilbert had himself put forth her petition, and—wonder of wonders!—Rosa-mund was actually consenting to it. Yes; consenting readily—somewhat hurriedly—quite graciously—and with no reservations.

She could hardly believe her ears.

Even Gilbert was surprised, since the young lady had not been exactly inclined to be acquiescent and compliant of late, but rather the contrary—disposed to dispute a position merely because it had been taken up, and argue against an opinion for no other apparent reason than that it had been put forward.

He had good-temperedly borne with and humoured her, as he would a fractious child, telling himself that she was not well and not herself; but, like Catharine, he had certainly rather anticipated a brief refusal now than otherwise, and had thought it would be a good thing to have the matter settled before her appearance.

To his mind Catharine, since she was disposed to be chatty and genial, would be a

distinct acquisition to the small and possibly somewhat silent party. Mr Liscard hardly ever talked, his sisters would relapse afresh under the new ordeal of the stately repast, and Rosamund—it might chance that Rosamund was in one of her moods.

He was now agreeably surprised by her easy assent, and furthermore, to find no one called over the coals—as Catharine had more than once been of late—for presuming and encroaching. He looked at his betrothed with gratitude and admiration. He thought she looked as she did upon that memorable evening. As on it, she was now but carelessly arrayed, and there had been no time to rearrange the loose tresses of her hair. Moreover, she had forgotten both a buckle and a ribbon; but in the haste and incompleteness he thought he read an effort made for his sake—and that was enough.

The changing colour and dropping eyelids were more to him at the moment than any dazzling display of charms; and the apologetic

"I am so sorry—I am afraid I have kept you waiting—I see I am late," was all that was needed to draw him to her side.

"In the best of time," he said, heartily. "One minute only after the dinner has been announced. That is quite as near as any one can expect, isn't it?" and he pressed the hand on his arm kindly.

"Is it? I—I am very glad."

"You were late coming in. I think, from what my sisters tell me, that you deserve a medal for accomplishing such a transformation in so short a time. You certainly must be the quickest dresser in the world. I dare-say it comes from being alone. Two, when they get together, talk."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"You had a run before dinner?"

"Yes. I had asked your sisters to go round the gardens with me," continued Rosamund, "but they seemed to prefer being taken to their room, being just off a long journey——"

——“Ay, they are no great travellers, and had had an early start. Besides, coming here is an event to them. So you had to go alone? You did not think of me?” as he led her to her seat.

“You? No. I—I thought you had had a long walk already.”

“You might have given me the refusal.”

But it was said without ill-will, and was so obviously meant to be taken in good part that she went so far as to make no answer at all.

They seated themselves at table, and grace was said.

For Em and Etta there was certainly now their first taste of the sweets of grandeur. To begin with, all preliminary terrors—even to the first shake of their host’s hand, and to the doubt as to which he would offer his arm to, and the wonder what should be done if he offered it to the wrong one—had now been happily disposed of. Then the tempting dinner-table, sweet with flowers, and shining with glass and silver, had been reduced to a

square to suit the smallness of the party, and the party itself was disposed to be cheerful. So that, though the room in which they sat was large and lofty, and the meal was a composed, noiseless, and stately affair, so far as eating and serving were concerned, it was by no means either what it would have been beneath the iron sway of the dead Lady Caroline, nor yet what Rosamund might have made it, had she been so minded.

There was no oppression in the air. There was even a general consciousness that conversation, or rather prattle which could hardly be dignified by the name, was being anxiously encouraged and timorously cultivated.

Then Major Gilbert talked and jested freely, having soon begun to do so under such conditions. He could almost have fancied the earliest days of his courtship back again, in meeting Rosamund's supporting applause, and the challenge that her dark eyes flashed around.

When he drew her on to unite with him in

recounting victories they had won, and fights they had fought together on the archery or tennis lawn, she was ready to attest and smile almost as she once had been. When he went still further, hinting broadly at what the future might have in store, the flush on her brow told of no cold rebuke nor indifference, but rather of a vivid and strong emotion ; and the silence which followed, seemed but its natural sequence.

He was more than satisfied—he was absolutely radiant.

“Come, Em, bless my soul ! you don’t say you don’t like apple-fritters ?” cried he, as she let the appetising dish pass. “Why, there’s nothing in the world beats apple-fritters when they’re good, and they are always good in this house,” helping himself plentifully. “These are simply first-rate,” after the first mouthful. “Your own apples, of course, Rosamund? You have had a rare crop of apples this year.”

His next sally was confidential.

“I say, Etta,” to the sister next him, “look

at Em now. By Jove! she knew what she was about. She waited for the pancakes, the greedy monkey. I thought one ought never to have pancakes except on Shrove Tuesday. I thought it went against people's consciences, Rosamund."

"I don't know about consciences," said Rosamund, "but certainly neither of these are correct company dishes. Your sisters must excuse our very old-fashioned cook."

"Faith, I will, if they don't," said Gilbert, laughing. "Long may old-fashioned dishes abound for me! I hope you will remember the sentiment, Rosamund. There's no resisting 'em. But, I say, how's this? You take nothing. Now I think of it, I don't believe you have eaten a single thing all through the dinner! You have said 'No' to everything. How is it? 'Not hungry?' Oh, but that will never do. You must have a glass of wine, anyway," and he seized the decanter from the man who was pouring out some for himself.

She took it to please him.

Had he offered her a cup of poison at the moment, I almost think she would have taken it all the same.

“Are you cold?” said he, suddenly. It seemed to him that she shivered as she put the wine-glass to her lips, and he laid his hand on hers. “Why, it is burning hot!” he cried. She started as if she had been pricked with a dagger’s point. She stared at him as if she wondered what he meant when he spoke.

CHAPTER XXI.

TEMPEST.

“What shall I do ? Resentment, indignation,
Love, pity, fear, and memory, how I’ve wronged him ;
Distract my quiet with the very thought on’t,
And tear my heart to pieces in my bosom.”

—OTWAY.

No, she was not going to break with him.

She had only had the idea presented to her.

An hour before, she had met Hartland in the garden, and he had come upon her in an unguarded moment : some scene, some recollection, had been present immediately before, and fancying herself unseen and unheard, she had been giving vent in irrepressible sobs, and sighs, and broken articulations, to the tempest of her heart.

She knew now that she did not love the man to whom her troth was plighted—that she never had, never could have loved him; and forthwith it seemed to her that every living creature, free from such a chain as bound herself, was to be envied.

Her own hands had, as it were, locked the chain, and locked it must remain; but oh! would God she had never known Frederick Gilbert!

All her youth, all the brightness and sweetness of the life on which she might now have entered as a free, glad, heedless creature, seemed at once to rise and mock her folly, who had erewhile held it cheap.

Her old home, that she had once panted to be quit of, how dear, how delightful might it now have become! Her father? He would have promoted everything, tolerated everything, given her free scope in everything. Aunt Julia would have been the head and front of every sort of happy misrule. The children should have had a bright childhood.

The boys should have brought home their school friends; the neighbours would have gathered round; summer festivals, autumn shooting - parties, and winter revelries in accord with the merry Yule-tide season—all would have been within reach, and there would have been now no one to run counter to, and extort a grudging consent from (alas! it was Rosamund's own mother of whom the girl thought, although the vision was an involuntary one)—and on all of this fair prospect she had now to turn her back, and receive, as solitary compensation, Frederick Gilbert, whom every day she loved less, and matrimony, which every day she dreaded more.

It had never been these, it had been the gratification of self-will, and the thirst of her soul after emancipation and freedom, which had been the bait.

That very morning—the morning of the sisters' arrival,—something—some trifle—had vexed her spirit afresh. She had meant to

conceal the annoyance, but had been betrayed by her lover's sudden appearance into revealing more than she had been herself aware of, as we know. She had but been pettish, she thought, and Frederick never seemed to mind such pettishness. It was not worth thinking about on his account, but—but—and she had rushed out into the balmy dusk afterwards, like a wild thing escaped from its snare, there to wring her hands and sob unseen.

Inadvertently Hartland had caught her thus. He did not waste time in preliminaries.

“You may as well tell the truth, Rosamund,” he said; “nothing but the truth will save you and him now.”

“The truth?” She struggled to rein in the rushing breath and quivering lip, and, with head averted, made a desperate feint even yet to hold her own. “The truth! What truth?”

“It is only doing Gilbert injustice,” proceeded her cousin, unheeding the question.

“He has acted in a plain, straightforward manner towards you, and you—I am afraid you are deceiving him.”

“Hartland !”

“And yourself too.”

“Hartland !”

“I have no motive for saying so, you know ; and, of course, if your mother had been alive, I should never have interfered ; but the fact is, it seems there is no one else to speak. No one else seems to see.”

“And you—you——?”

“Oh, I see plainly enough. You took this good fellow in an obstinate fit, and now you have got him, you don’t care to keep him. You think he is not worth the trouble. Well, I’ll be plain, and I’ll say I think he is being confoundedly badly used. What’s more, Rosamund, if it were not for his own sake, I should say you were bound to stick to him. You would have no right to throw him over. But for his——,” he paused.

“You think he is too good for me ?”

“He is too good for you to play fast and loose with.”

“Hartland, how dare you?” A sudden flash.

“Oh, I dare because there is no one else,” said he, indifferently. “Your father will not——”

“Certainly he will not. My father never spoke to me in my life as you have done.”

“Just so. Neither would your aunt.”

“No, indeed.”

“Nor any one else—now?”

“No.”

“Somebody must,” said Lord Hartland, doggedly.

“For his sake, I suppose?”

“For his sake, yes. I am, of course, sorry also for you, but——”

“It is natural to put him first.”

“Because he has done no wrong,” maintained Hartland, looking her steadily in the face.

She was silenced. A full minute passed,

and neither would nor could be the first to break it. At length, as often happens in such cases, both burst forth at once.

“The fact is, Rosamund——”

“I must say, Hartland——”

“Well?” said he, yielding precedence.

“You—you might have spoken sooner.”

“Oh.” This was hardly what he had expected, and it must be owned he was somewhat taken aback by it. “Well, I suppose I might,” he said slowly, at last.

“You have been on the watch, you have played the spy,” continued his cousin, excitedly clasping and unclasping her hands, and drawing quick, short breaths as she spoke. “How, then, how has it happened that while you have been so clear-sighted and penetrating, you have not said a word, nor—nor——”

“I have *not* played the spy, Rosamund, or I might have done so. I only saw, when the light was forced upon me ; I only knew, when ignorance became impossible.”

“You mean by—by——”

“Your face, your voice, your manner, your everything. You are a changed creature. You are ungracious, sullen, bitter—you who used to be——”

“Never mind what I used to be.”

“When he is by, I could almost call you shrewish.”

“It is a pity he does not find me so.”

“At other times you are sunk in melancholy, or—or else——”

“Or else?—what else?”

“As I found you just now,” said he, in rather a low voice.

There was another pause.

“And all the rest,” said Rosamund, presently. “How is it that you alone have perceived what all beside have been blind to? You have been so clever—where have their wits been?”

“You may well ask that. I ask it of myself continually.”

“You mean that I have done nothing to—to keep up appearances?”

“Not much, certainly.”

“It is false,” cried Rosamund, passionately. “I have tried and tried, no one knows how much,”—she bit her lip, and wrenched her hands apart, furious with herself for an admission so inadvertent. “You have no right to force this out of me ; your cruel accusations oblige me to—to——”

“You have told me nothing I did not know before,” said he, quietly.

“You think Major Gilbert is not satisfied ?”

“Of that you must be a better judge than I.”

“You think he is being duped ?”

“Ask that of yourself. There again you should know best.”

“And this is the friend of the injured man, who now interposes on his behalf,” exclaimed Rosamund, with renewed fire ; “this is the benevolent bystander, who cannot stand by and see ‘a good fellow’ played ‘fast and loose’ with ! How brave of you, my cousin ! How noble ! It is a pity, however, the effect

is somewhat marred by over-caution. He marches boldly enough to the attack, but directly it comes to close quarters he knows nothing, and can give an opinion on nothing. Oh, the diffidence, the modesty of some people! Pray, Lord Hartland, accept my humble commendations. I cannot sufficiently applaud the course you have chosen to adopt."

If she had hoped to taunt him into recrimination, the effort failed.

"Applaud or not, as you please," said Hartland, bluntly. "I expected you'd be angry, and I suppose I ought to say you have a right to be. All the same, do, for heaven's sake, Rosamund, take my words to heart, and put an end to this—this mistake, as soon as you can."

"How dare you speak so? How dare you call it 'a mistake'?"

"I could easily call it by a worse name. But," and his tone softened, "I will only say 'mistake,' and a very unfortunate one. This

engagement should never have taken place ; but since it has taken place, the only remedy is to break it off as speedily as possible."

"I will never break it off."

He stopped short, surprised at last. He now knew that he had meant her to snatch at the suggestion.

"You will not ? " he said.

"Not while I live."

"You prefer lifelong misery to a passing humiliation ? "

"I prefer keeping my word to breaking it."

"You are not keeping it ; you are only keeping the shell of it. You are keeping it in the letter only—the spirit is already broken."

"He does not know this. He never shall know it."

"How are you to keep it from him ? And even if you do keep it, are you to go on befooling him through all life—— ? "

——"Befooling him ! Hartland—Hartland." She was choking with passion. "How cruel, how wicked you are ! How—how can you—

how dare you speak to me like that? And you,—you know all—you know how hard I had to fight for him, and how I had to stand up for him before everybody; and how I—I,—oh, you must remember that dreadful scene?—and there were many, many more that you know nothing of, besides that one! Mamma was so determined against him. Aunt Julia was against him too; and my friends, I think that every one of them was the same. Only I—and—and only you, were for him.”

“Nay, Rosamund, I never——”

——“You never what? Do you mean now to say that you never encouraged me, never told me I was right, and——”

——“Only when I thought your heart was engaged. Had I known more——”

——“What more could you have known? You knew as much as any one; quite, quite as much as I did myself. No one really knew——”

——“Take care,” said Hartland, softly touching her arm; “do not let us be over-

heard," pointing to some gardeners at work near. "Come back this way," and he led her again into the narrow hedged-in path from which, unconsciously, they had been about to emerge. "Do not suppose that I underrate all the difficulties that have beset you, Rosamund," he proceeded, after a few minutes' pause. "From the first you have had a thorny path to tread, and you have had to tread it alone and unaided. But you seemed so strong and resolute, and so entirely able to cope with the task you had set yourself——"

——"The task? I don't understand. What task?"

"It must always be a task to run counter to one's family. Forgive me for speaking in plain words, but——"

——"Oh, the plainer the better."

"We are getting no nearer the point," said Hartland, suddenly, "and time is passing—we must not waste it in idle retrospect: it is no use looking back—all that can now be done——"

“Nothing can now be done—nothing, nothing. Oh, why did you come here to try me, to tempt me?” cried Rosamund, bitterly. “I never asked your help, I never went to you with my story—I could bear it myself, if I were only let alone. The others are far kinder than you. They say nothing, and see nothing. And after all,” defiantly,—“after all, what is there to see? I am not, perhaps, recklessly and wildly in love, as the saying is,” with a laugh of scorn. “I have found out that—that Major Gilbert is but a man, and not a hero. He does very well. He is very kind. He is quite good enough for me. What is all this stir about, then, I should like to know? And who are you, that you should interfere, and presume to——” and again rising resentment choked her utterance.

“If we go on like this we shall never come to an end,” exclaimed Hartland, with what seemed but the natural impatience of a man under feminine circumlocution, though a close observer might have dimly suspected another

emotion struggling beneath. "Rosamund, look how the darkness is creeping on. I cannot wait—nor can you. We must not be longer here together, and this may be my last, my very last chance of seeing you alone. Do hear me, do not be angry with me. You say you mean to marry Major Gilbert, although you own—yes, you do, you *have* owned that you no longer love him. You may do this thing, Rosamund—I suppose there is no one to prevent your doing it; but remember that when you have fulfilled your promise as it now stands, you have only just begun the horrible farce——"

——"Why need it be a farce?" But in spite of herself, she was awed by his vehemence.

"It would be a farce you would have to keep up year after year——"

——"It need never be one at all. I could learn to feel differently. Others do. I have often heard it said that affection comes after marriage——"

“Not to women like you, Rosamund. With you, to love would be to love, and to hate to hate,” proceeded the speaker, in a slow, unimpassioned tone, which seemed to be but the outcome of his own thoughts, addressed to the silent dusk and no human ear. “With you the dawn of disenchantment would close at night in thunders of despair. You would grow desperate—perhaps worse. You would make all around you miserable, and your own heart would bleed to death. I know you well. I should be afraid for you—afraid for you.” He turned away his head.

Another silence, another long interval, wherein the two dimly outlined figures paced on side by side, each occupied with an internal struggle.

“You are so young,” said Lord Hartland at length, “you did not know what you were about. The world will blame you if you now faithfully confess as much, but those who know you best will understand and forgive. After all, however, it is not for yourself that

I plead—it is for him. He may be, he must be wounded in his tenderest point, if you confess to him the truth—as you know the truth in your own heart to be; but think, Rosamund, only think what that wound would be were it to take place when there was no remedy! His whole life would be ruined by his having been the victim of your caprice. For God's sake, Rosamund—dear Rosamund—do not so barbarously use a heart whose only fault is loving you.”

Before she could find voice for a reply he was gone.

“Rosamund, dear Rosamund!” The words rang in her ears, and throbbed through all her pulses. He had never at any time so addressed her hitherto; she had never had an affectionate word from him that she could remember.

And now, of all times, to call her “dear”! Now, at the close of such a conversation upon such a subject. Now, when the hardest things had been said, and the coldest tones used, and

no veil, not the thinnest, of charity had been thrown over the ugly, naked truth.

No shade of consideration had been shown. Scarce an excuse had been offered.

He had divined her misery, and those haunting suspicions which ceaselessly hung overhead where'er she moved or turned; and he had ruthlessly dragged the dark shadow from the background, and told her what it was, and how it should be dealt with. He had expressed no pity, no regret for her. A mere perfunctory "I am sorry for you" could not take rank as any real compassion; and it had been almost more than either her temper or her pride could bear, to be exhorted to courage and openness, as though she were some cowardly child shrinking from a well-merited punishment.

With difficulty she had held back the flood-gates of her wrath; and then, that one little word, that one soft tone, had altered all. Her swelling heart hung upon the remembrance. Every former feeling vanished.

It grew late, yet she could not go in to face her lover, her guests, light, noise, and merriment.

Out in this kindly spot she must have another, and yet another brief moment, for thoughts unutterable and pangs unintelligible.

How had this strange interview come about ? How had it begun ?

She strove to call to mind his opening sentence, and the shock it had given her.

She had, she knew, experienced a momentary convulsion, a sudden upheaval of emotions, in which amazement, shame, and anger had struggled for the mastery.

Then had followed a woman's swift instinct for concealment. She would allow nothing, acknowledge nothing, if possible betray nothing ; and in her poor, weak, childish way she had, as we have seen, again and again endeavoured to divert the charge, turn it aside, and carry the war into the enemy's country.

She had summoned every power she possessed to her aid, and had been undeniable in

her spirit, and prompt in maintaining her independence.

For all his seeming insensibility, he could not but have winced now and again.

She had meant him to wince; would fain have hurt, tortured him—done anything to revenge the agony he was inflicting on her. For her he had not had one kind thought. Therein lay—although Rosamund little knew it—the sting of the whole.

The hot tears streamed unchecked over her cheeks now. Not one kind thought!

And she had been so used to his approval, to his partisanship,—she had so counted on having him always on her side in battles past! He had been her shield, her stay, her stronghold in Lady Caroline's time,—his word on her behalf had been worth its weight in gold, his support invincible.

She had allowed to herself that the consciousness of his applause had been one of the sweetest ingredients in her cup of triumph.

All was now withdrawn. In his eyes she had forfeited every claim to approbation. The nobility of mind wherewith he had credited her, what did he think of it now?

As plainly as though he had put it into words, it had been shown that he despised her in the sharpness of his disappointment, and looked with scorn upon the childish whim which he had mistaken for something finer.

She snatched a blossom from her path, and tore the petals out.

Resentment, mortification, and a fierce desire yet to acquit herself of the hateful charge, raged in her burning bosom. It was no longer Gilbert of whom she thought: he was nothing—less than nothing—to her at the moment. She had no quarrel with him, had received no injury from him.

Had he then and there confronted her, she would have received him—as she did afterwards receive him—with gentleness and shamefacedness.

Had he at once demanded and urged the fulfilment of her troth-plight, the request would almost certainly have been granted.

Anything to put Hartland in the wrong ; chafe and thwart Hartland ; flaunt her resolution before Hartland's eyes. Who was he that he should stand forward and constitute himself the champion of the absent ?

Had she not chosen Frederick Gilbert of herself, and by herself ; held to him in the teeth of difficulty, resistance, and oppression ; faced Lady Caroline at her worst, and won the game against all odds ?

And yet now, forsooth, for the man's own sake, because Gilbert was her poor defenceless victim, because his life would be ruined by her constancy, must this meddler step in between, and with a high hand command her to let her lover go !

Opposition, indeed, passive as well as active, she had hitherto experienced. Lady Julia had been tearful, other relations dubious, the neighbourhood generally unsympathetic. But

the feeling had so obviously emanated from a sense of *her* having found no fitting mate, of *her* superiority to the match, that she had been able haughtily to ignore it.

Now the tables were turned. She was informed that it was she who was not good enough for Gilbert.

He was true—she was a deceiver. He was honest—she was playing a part.

The insult was too much.

And then, just as this point had been reached, would come to pass a strange, inexplicable transformation of the whole. A word, two words—two little words, and a falling tone, and a troubled eye, would come between all else and memory; and the rankling thorn, and the cruel rebuke, and the still more cruel indifference, would all vanish, be lost, swallowed up in—in what? “*Dear Rosamund.*”

CHAPTER XXII.

“IT MAKES ME MAD WITH ROSAMUND.”

“Artful concealment ill becomes the brave.”

—*Odyssey*.

LET not my readers be misled by the interview recorded in the last chapter.

It had been, we may as well say at once, fully as natural and spontaneous as had appeared. Nothing had been further from Rosamund's thoughts than that she should be thus taxed for doing her lover injustice,—nothing more foreign to Hartland's nature than thus to tax her.

But as he had shown, there was no one else to bell the cat.

He had sounded his aunt, and to his aston-

ishment even that peaceable, rotund little spinster had bristled all over at the very idea of Major Gilbert's not having every reason to be proud, and thankful, and content. The young man, Lady Julia had averred, had got what he wanted—a footing in their family. Furthermore, he had selected and obtained the flower of the flock, the pick of the bunch. Pray, what more could he desire? What was there left to desire? For her part at least, she could see nothing. Her poor, dear sister no longer there, no one there to oppose nor obstruct his wishes in any way, he had made good his position as prospective son-in-law and brother-in-law, in a way that she must own fairly took away her breath. He had carried all before him in the hitherto impregnable fortress of King's Common; Rosamund was one with him, Mr Liscard deferred to him, the children abetted him, the servants obeyed him. He seemed to pervade all, and govern all. He was ill to please indeed, if he were not satisfied. For herself, she wished to hear

no more of the subject. Major Gilbert's very name was distasteful to her; the whole affair was distasteful to her; and though she was obliged to be outwardly polite, and restrain herself before her niece, Hartland, who knew how unhappy and disappointed she had been made by it all, might spare her the discussion of so odious a topic.

Subsequently she had chid herself for being peevish and out of humour,—but still he had seen that no good could come of pressing her further.

Could he indeed have said—"Save Rosamund; speak to Rosamund for her own sake," he would have obtained an immediate hearing. But this was just what he could not do. Truth was a native inhabitant of his bosom, and truth at this juncture forbade diplomacy. Honestly he thought his cousin ought to suffer whatever evil consequences should be the result of her own rash act,—as honestly he felt that Gilbert was an innocent man wronged.

To have gone then either to herself, or to

Lady Julia, saying other than he had said, was impossible.

Failing the relation most natural and best beloved, he had, before appealing to Rosamund, made one other effort—he had spoken to Mr Liscard. But he had been obliged to be so vague, he had seen such staring, hopeless incredulity on the other side of enlightenment, and there had been such an obvious internal “Good heavens!—what *can* the fellow mean?” that he had hastily given up the attempt, and had never tried a second.

This had happened only a few hours before he had met his cousin in the twilight, and his mind running on her affairs, he had been lost in meditation, and had only just arrived at the conclusion that whosever business it was to interfere, it was certainly not his, when he found himself launched headlong into the very thick of a hand-to-hand combat with Rosamund herself.

The fight once begun, Hartland had, as we know, struck out boldly, neither mincing his

meaning, nor smoothing down his implications.

She had been no less ready with retort and defiance, and, as he had anticipated, had roundly asserted her ability to manage her own affairs.

Then he had called her "dear Rosamund," and her parted lips had forgotten to speak, and her eyes had met his for one long, burning moment.

He had gone with that word and look ; but he had not himself been fully aware that he had done so, because he durst not trust himself to speak another, nor to meet that gaze again.

Oh, why, why, why had he never so felt, so shuddered and glowed before ?

He had had his chance, the fairest chance man ever had,—and he had beheld it come and go with an indifference which seemed now incredible. He had not even been awakened to a sense of danger by pangs of incipient jealousy when Gilbert's star had first appeared

on the horizon. On the contrary, he had been interested, aroused, nay, after a fashion amused by the affair in its earliest stages ; while afterwards Lady Caroline’s foolish and arbitrary attempts to stamp it out, had excited in his heart a degree of opposition, which had sharpened into fervour after the rescue in the mill-dam.

By that time, it is true, a new admiration and sympathy had begun to stir his spirit when he thought of Rosamund ; but these feelings had not struck sufficiently deep to prevent his experiencing a genuine, if somewhat self-torturing pride and pleasure in what he considered the nobility of her nature, who could thus exalt and distinguish what was great, and shut her eyes to what were, after all, but trifling blemishes in her lover.

Thenceforth she had taken a new stand not only in his opinion, but in his imagination. She had been constantly in his mind ; and without envying Gilbert, he had found himself, he knew not why, disposed to stifle a sigh as he thought of the fortunate man.

But it had not been until repeated shocks had rudely shaken aside the veil, and revealed, beyond a shade of doubt, the naked, wretched truth with regard to his unhappy cousin, that he had learned all that was in his own heart.

Then, indeed, he had been petrified with horror and amazement to find himself instinct with a life of which he had never dreamed, and which insulted him and her alike by now throbbing and surging within. Permit it, encourage it, let it appear on the surface? Never. His first impulse had been to flee the place, and see neither one nor other of the betrothed pair again, until after wedlock had made them one; and this, had he thought only of himself, he would at once have carried into effect.

But such a course would, after all, only have healed his own wound (had it done as much), and would in no wise have bettered either Gilbert's, or Rosamund's condition.

His absence or presence was a matter of no consequence to them, but their mutual atti-

tudes towards each other were charged with an importance impossible to be over-rated, and how either was to be warned or saved, was the great—ought at least to be the great—consideration.

This sounds cold enough.

Hartland told himself he was as cool as a cucumber, and as impassive as a judge, while reasoning it all out.

For himself he and his feelings were nowhere—or, at any rate, were well in the background: he was smarting for his folly, and deserved to do so, and would get over it as he had done before; but he did not like to think of Gilbert.

Whenever he thought of Gilbert it gave him a turn. Whenever he saw Rosamund and her lover in each other's company, he cried out that the poor fellow was being befooled and betrayed.

Then he had set snares for his cousin, and she had fallen into them.

He had found out that she tossed her head

and bit her lip at certain allusions. That she had no desire to pursue certain subjects. That she would have a sharp retort ready wherewith to parry certain questions.

If she were expected to be cognisant of any of the circumstances of Major Gilbert's life (she had known all about them at one time), she would now be as coldly ignorant as Lady Caroline herself could have been; and if appealed to on the subject of his tastes and pursuits, she knew no more of these than of the others. The very mention of his name would bring to her face the same look that it had begun to assume at the sound of his voice.

The only wonder, then, was, as Hartland had himself said, that every one had not seen as clearly as he. He had been genuinely incensed by the absence of all control, the indecency, the inhumanity with which, to his mind, his fickle cousin had allowed the change in her affections to be manifest; and dwelling on this sense of irritation and indignation, and losing sight of his own emotions for the nonce,

he had fired off at her the sudden charge which had led to the scene above narrated. Lost in thought and retrospection, he now hurried along, aware that darkness was gathering, or rather had already gathered around but for the silvery light of a rising moon ; and so engrossing were his reflections that a loud “Holloa !” from behind was suffered twice to pass unresponded to.

The third repetition of the summons, however, was not to be ignored either consciously or unconsciously ; and turning his head, he beheld the person from whom it had proceeded—namely, the young rector, his friend Stoneby, who had emerged from some wayside cottage in time to catch a glimpse of and recognise the pedestrian on in front, but not to overtake him.

Truth to tell, Lord Hartland would at that precise moment have preferred to be alone.

Jack Stoneby was a good fellow, the best of fellows, his own particular parson, his right-hand cricketer, his nearest neighbour ; but he

did not want Jack just then, he did not want anybody just then. And though Stoneby would neither interrogate him nor irritate him, though he was a man who could hold his peace and be content with dumb fellowship as few had the gift of being, still Jack was somebody, and nobody would have been welcome at the moment; even a grasshopper would have been a burden. Involuntarily the young peer dropped an exclamation, and his brow contracted.

All through the coming evening he would have to talk to Lady Julia, and listen to her—all through the long, long evening! And he did want to think over what had passed, and ponder on this phrase and that, and puzzle out the meaning of the whole. He did think he might have had this short half-hour for remembrance and conjecture. What ill luck had set Stoneby stirring at that time of night? He should have been snug within his own four walls, beside his study fire, or partaking of his well-earned dinner. He should

not be meandering out on a November evening, at nearly seven o'clock.

"Holloa, you, I say!" began he, when the two were near enough for speech, "what are you doing out along the road at this time of night? You will be as hoarse as a crow on Sunday, Mr Parson, and then it will be the worse for us who have to come and hear you."

"That's all *you* think about, naturally," retorted Stoneby, joining him. "But it ought to console you to reflect that this being only Monday, if I have to submit to a mustard-plaster on my throat all to-night, I have the rest of the week in which to get well. You have been at King's Common, I suppose?"

"Yes."

Nothing further, and the two stepped along, each unaware of what might be passing in the other's breast.

"What about your football on Saturday, Hartland?"

"It is to come off. The ground is all right."

"Not too wet?"

“A little wet, but this wind will dry it. We like a soft ground, so long as it is not under water.”

“How about the team?”

“Oh, we shall do. No great things.”

“Marks can play, can he?”

“Yes.”

“Jenkinson?”

“Can’t give a definite answer yet.”

“And you have Jones, and Burrell, and Penridding. You ought to do pretty well.”

“I think so.”

If it had been the response of any one else, its lukewarmness, not to say dispiritedness, would have created some distrust in the hearer; but Stoneby, who took nearly as keen an interest in the subject as Hartland himself, knew his man, and rating his “I think so” at its true value, wondered at the indifference by which it was accompanied. Lord Hartland would not have said more had the event been an absolute certainty, and two days before

Lord Hartland had been all anxiety and animation on the subject.

He now let it drop with an air of weariness, and the next instant began about something totally different. "They say that boy Gilbert saved has never been quite right since," he said. "Is it true?"

"He is in bed again to-day," replied Stoneby. "I was that way this afternoon, and looked in. He keeps ailing from one thing and another, and they think it is a matter of time his getting quite over it."

"Have they had a doctor?"

"Makin's assistant has been once or twice."

"Not Makin himself?"

"He is very busy, and has a lot on his hands just now."

"And they think there is nothing much amiss," said Hartland, absently. He scarcely knew what he was talking about, but had a vague idea that talk was better than silence, and that Billy Barley was a safe topic.

"Oh no. The little fellow will grow out of

it; he is young and hearty," said Stoneby, and another full stop ensued.

"Lady Julia quite well?" he inquired presently, when another three minutes had passed.

"Yes. Thanks."

"I saw your omnibus at the station, meeting the London train."

"She was not in it, though. It had been sent to meet some people."

"I am glad I did not stop the coachman, then. I wanted to see Lady Julia; but any day will do. I will walk over to-morrow or next day."

"She is sure to be in at luncheon-time to-morrow."

"But she will be engaged with your visitors. Another day will do."

"The visitors were not for us," said Hartland; "they were for my cousin Rosamund. Our omnibus went because one of her horses is lame."

"Oh!"

“You will see them when you go to King’s Common,” proceeded Hartland; “it is Major Gilbert’s sisters who have come to be introduced to the family, and make the acquaintance of their future sister-in-law.”

“Have they? Oh, they will stop some time then, I suppose?”

“I suppose so.”

“Are they—are they—what do they seem like? I mean, are they likely to be acquisitions to your circle?”

“Come, say out what you mean, Jack Stoneby,” said Hartland, shaking his arm good-humouredly. “No need to put on fine phrases for me. You mean how will Rosamund get on with these Gilberts? I tell you frankly, I don’t know; and I don’t look forward ever to knowing: she will never tell.” There was no mistaking the change in his air and tone. He was now aroused, interested, alert. He was going to pursue the subject.

“I did not see these new-comers,” proceeded he, after a moment’s pause, “but I shall to-

morrow. So will you, if you come, as you said you would. Come, and bring your sister. My aunt has asked the party from King's Common over."

"But your aunt may prefer having them by themselves?"

"I can answer for her that she will not. You will allow that I know Lady Julia? Well, come,—she will be more than pleased, she will be *relieved* to have you."

"Is that it?" said Stoneby, comprehending. "Then you may depend on us. I rather gathered that Lady Julia was not—that Major Gilbert was not a favourite with her. But you—you like him, don't you?"

"Like Gilbert?"

"I say, you like Gilbert, don't you?"

"I—I—I don't know, I am sure."

"My dear fellow, what is the matter?" cried Stoneby, laughing; "what makes you look at me in that way? I ask you a very simple question, and you look as perturbed as though I had propounded a problem of Euclid! At the

same time, of course, I can understand, that as Gilbert is going to be a member of your family, perhaps you would rather not——"

——"Oh, rot!" said Hartland. "I could surely say to you what I think of a fellow, though he is going to marry my third cousin, once or twice removed. But the fact is, I—the question itself was a poser—I had never really put it to myself. Come to think of it, I suppose I do like Gilbert. Certainly I admire him—or, at least, a great deal about him. He does not shine in small things; he is rather a nuisance in a house; but he is a good fellow, a very good fellow in the main. Oh, of course I must like *him*, though I may not exactly care for his society."

"I should think he is well-principled and conscientious."

"Oh, I should think so, certainly."

"And a good commanding officer."

"And likely to rise in the service."

"Clever."

"And popular."

“And good-tempered, and easy to live with,” summed up Stoneby.

“For those who like his good temper and ease,” rejoined Hartland. “Now you do, Jack ; you know you do ; so it is no use your hanging back, and looking up and down like that. Gilbert is just the sort of man to take your fancy, and you ought to stand by him and own it. Come now, don’t be shabby ; speak out.”

Still Jack was silent.

“It’s deuced hard on that poor fellow that *nobody* hereabouts likes him,” said Hartland, plaintively. “Why shouldn’t we like him, you and I ? Why shouldn’t we like him, I say ? It is not his fault. He does his best all round ; and I am sure there is nothing he would not do to please. The trouble he has taken for me in several ways makes me quite ashamed, when I think of what a busy man he is, and what an idle fool I am ; but the fact is, he could do the things, and I couldn’t. And he makes so light of the trouble, and is so

cheerful over it, that I hardly know which way to look when I have to thank him, I feel so beastly cold and ungrateful. And I am sure, Jack, he always speaks most kindly of you. Only the other day he was sounding your praises ; and he went ever so far out of his way with a parcel for your sister last night, though it was wet and cold, because he thought it was something she wanted particularly. I was there and saw it all. And there's Lady Julia, too," proceeded the speaker, "she who likes everybody, and who, I never thought, knew one from another—she has not a good word for him ! When I bring him to the Abbey, she draws herself up, and is so laboriously polite, that it is quite oppressive. He is the only person with whom I have ever seen her in the least like—like poor Lady Caroline."

"Does he see it ?"

"Not in the least. He told me the other day, with a wink, that he could always come round the old ladies. She had just been particularly bad to him."

“But Lady Julia’s ‘badness’——” began Stoneby, laughing.

“Oh, we know what it is, of course. I don’t blame his want of perception *there*,” said Hartland, emphatically. To the surprise of his friend he was now frowning and biting his lip, while something evidently lay behind.

“After all,” said Mr Stoneby, quietly, “none of this really signifies much, does it? It cannot be of any real importance to Major Gilbert that he is not altogether popular among us. We have our own ways and habits. He has his, and his, I believe, serve him in very good stead among his brother officers and in society generally.”

“Society? Hum!”

“His society. The society he habitually moves in. Soldiers are at home everywhere, you know——”

——“*You* telling me about soldiers! You are in a hole, my friend, and you are only blundering further and further in. I under-

stand you perfectly. Gilbert's class is not ours, and that we have both found out.”

“His true worth must outweigh that in the long-run, Hartland.”

“I have told myself so a hundred times,” said Hartland, vehemently; “it is what I have consoled myself with over and over again. But, Stoneby, if—if it should not?”

“If it should not?”

“If—if—did it ever strike you, Jack, that it might be awkward for a man if his wife did not—eh?”

“His wife, Hartland? We were not speaking of a wife.”

“I am now. Suppose the glamour were to wear off, and the wife—we'll say my cousin—supposing she did happen to feel about Gilbert as we do——”

“My dear Hartland, why suppose such a thing? In that case, what reason could she have had for accepting him?”

“True — very true; as you say, what reason? At the same time—by heaven!”

exclaimed Hartland, suddenly, "Lady Caroline had only herself to thank that it came to what it did. Any person of sense could have seen with half a glance that it was a tug-of-war between mother and daughter, and Rosamund—poor Rosamund—won." His accents, which had begun by ringing out harsh and sharp, sank and faltered at the close. There was reality, passion, grief in every note. "I say, don't speak of this," he went on hurriedly, "don't you ever remember that I said it—unless—unless things should be different. But it's God's truth, Stoneby; that's what it is. That poor girl is entangled in a net woven by her own hands, and she will never, left to herself, cut her way out of it. What's worse, he is blind, and stupid, and deaf, and drugged to sleep by the intoxication of his own happiness. He can't see. He has no eyes to see. They have got themselves so completely caught—no, it is not '*they*'—'tis she alone who has played the fool. That's why I stand by Gilbert, d'ye see? I don't like him; I don't

take to him ; I shirk him ; I get out of his way whenever I can,—but I am ashamed to look him in the face. He is a frank, straightforward, honourable fellow ; and yet because he does not understand the tittle-tattle of the drawing-room, and has—yes, he has a beast of a laugh—I somehow never care to remain in the same room with him. And Rosamund——” he stopped short.

Stoneby said nothing.

“It is all very well for you,” pursued the speaker,—“you have only to tell yourself that this is no business of yours, and have done with it ; but I have to go over there day after day and see it going on——”

“Why do you go so often ?”

“Why—why—why ? Of course I go. I always have gone. It would seem very odd if I did not go. Why shouldn’t I go ?”

“Only if it pains you——”

“‘Pains’ me ! Who says it ‘pains’ me ? It disgusts and irritates me. It makes me mad with Rosamund, and unjust towards poor Gil-

bert. But that's my affair. I had rather be there and see it all, than stop away and know it's going on. That is what I can't do. I cannot keep out of the way, and let this interloper have the run of the place. To see him strolling about now, with his hands in his pockets, and his hat stuck on the back of his head—and to remember that less than two months ago he was but just admitted to make a formal call, and that had Lady Caroline lived, even this engagement would hardly have procured him intimacy—it is altogether too much. If he is to go about saying and doing all sorts of objectionable things, I must be there too,——”

“Do you do any good?”

“Good? None whatever. Rather harm, I should say.”

“Then again, why go?”

“Because—as I say—because—well, because I can't help it. I am a fool.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

GILBERT UNDOES IT ALL.

“Quit, quit, for shame! this will not move,
 This cannot take her;
 If of herself she will not love,
 Nothing can make her.
 The devil take her.”

—Sir JOHN SUCKLING.

“DID you hear that about the Abbey?” whispered Henrietta Gilbert to her sister, as soon as she conveniently could that evening. “We are to go over there to-morrow and take luncheon, and see the place; so it must have been all nonsense about Lord Hartland.”

“’Sh,” frowned Emily, glancing round in apprehension, for Etta’s asides were by no means always inaudible. They were, however, at a safe distance from the rest of the

party, having gone off together to inspect an old cabinet, and under cover of so doing, exchange confidences. "Don't let them see us talking," further counselled she. "Etta, your waistband is hanging down. I saw it directly you came into the dining - room; stand still, and let me tuck it up. How well Rosamund looks in black!" tucking vigorously. "I don't believe she could look better in colours; it must be Frederick's fancy, because he never likes anything doleful."

"Did you notice how prettily the skirt was hung?" murmured Etta back; "those large bunches falling so softly? That is the new fashion. I wish we had seen it before we got these," somewhat ruefully. "I never did like the drapery of these, and mine is so dreadfully tight too. I can scarcely breathe."

"You will do yourself no good by wriggling about; you should have had it seen to before you left. There; the band is all right now, at any rate; but do remember to fasten it another time."

“What shall we wear for to-morrow’s luncheon, Em?”

“Our bests, of course.”

“The new plush skirts?” said Etta, in a tone of awe.

“Of course. When could we have a better occasion for them?”

“And if we are asked to walk about, and it comes on to rain?”

“Nonsense. We got them to wear, not to lie in the cupboard. Frederick will expect us to look our best.”

“Is Frederick going?”

“Ask him now,” as Frederick approached. He had detained his betrothed, alleging that she had done nothing but run away from him ever since he came, and had had his complaint allowed, and all his demands granted;—furthermore, the pretty diamond fly which had waited for an opportunity to emerge from his waistcoat-pocket and settle on her fair neck, had been gratefully and timidly received, while the eyes that sank beneath his were

to his certain knowledge, suffused with moisture.

He had excused her following him into the room thereafter, and now made his way towards his sisters alone, and supremely happy.

“Eh! what—what mischief are you two hatching?” said he; “whenever I see you two together, I know there’s mischief in the wind. Am I ‘going’? ‘Going’ where? One at a time—one at a time. Oh, to the Abbey, is it? I have heard nothing of it. Whose idea is it? Your own, or Rosamund’s?”

“Lady Julia Verelst’s,” replied Emily, with unction. “Lady Julia has invited us all.”

“For to-morrow, eh? To what? Dinner?”

“Luncheon. Luncheon at two o’clock.”

“Luncheon? That’s a pity. I doubt whether I can get over to luncheon. When did the invitation come? Just now?”

“I don’t know when it came; but Rosamund told us—or rather told me just now,” said Henrietta. “She said it in a sort of

off-hand way — ‘My aunt hopes to see us there at luncheon to-morrow,’ and I saw the note handed to her, directly we came in here after dinner. It was lying about afterwards. It was lying open, and I saw ‘Do not be later than two,’ for some reason or other. There it is now——”

“Well, well, never mind. I say you mustn’t look into notes and things, you know.”

“It was wide open, Frederick.”

“Was it? I daresay. All right. But about my going, I am not so sure. I am glad you are to go. Old Julia always does the right thing. She is a rare jolly old bird, is Julia; and you will like seeing the Abbey, too. There is armour, and pictures, and things. Take care what you say about ’em all: people are touchy on family concerns, you know.”

“You like Lady Julia? She is not like—the other one?” whispered Emily, somewhat anxiously.

“Not a scrap. No, indeed. Julia’s the

best of creatures. We are tremendous friends, Julia and I. I call on her whenever I am that way. She likes the attention, and, by Jove! she is the only one of all the women in this confounded neighbourhood that I care to pay it to. They are the most capricious lot. There's Mrs Waterfield for one. She seemed uncommonly nice and friendly to me the first time I went to pay my respects—and she is barely civil now,—as to making you free of her house, she wouldn't think of such a thing. I don't know whether my taking up in this quarter, instead of in hers, may not have had something to do with it, mind you: a woman with six daughters who don't go off, ought to be forgiven a good deal,—and from the very first, every one knew who it was I was bitten with. Well, but there are others besides her; not people you know anything of. This is a stiffish bit of country to work. Even that long-backed parson Stoneby buttons up his coat when he meets you, as much as to say 'I keep myself to myself;'—the

Stonebys are supposed to belong to a good family,—be hanged if I know who doesn't belong to a good family hereabouts!—we shall have to belong to a good family ourselves, next."

"So we shall, very soon," said Etta, archly.

"That is not 'belonging,' you goose. Never mind, it's all humbug; one family is as good as another, I say. And the Stonebys aren't half bad when you get to know them, neither. I say, Rosamund," as she re-entered, "the girls must call on the Stonebys."

"I will take them wherever they would like to go," replied she, with that new-born gentleness still pervading her demeanour; "we have but few neighbours, but they will all be very glad, I am sure," and she looked courteously round.

"There are the Waterfields," proceeded Gilbert, thus encouraged. "What Waterfields are there now at home?"

Could Rosamund but have answered "None"! She would have given much, very much at the

moment, to have known and announced that her old friends were still absent; but as it was, she was but too unfortunately well aware that all, even to Diana, had returned with their mother on the previous day.

Her aunt Julia she had scarcely cared about, and the Stonebys were nothing to her, but she did for a moment shrink from presenting Em and Etta to the eyes of the fastidious Waterfields. In old days the Waterfields had been wont themselves to experience anxiety in bringing this or that stranger beneath the range of Lady Caroline's survey,—they had confided to herself their doubts and tremors, and had awaited the verdict from her sympathising lips;—if it had been haughty disdain, she had softened it down,—if cold approbation, she had warmed it up;—but all had by common consent submitted after a fashion their judgment to that of the omnipotent dame. Of course Rosamund had pouted and flouted; of course she had tossed up her head, and given utterance to lordly protest and dis-

belief,—but with it all, there had been a secret sense of superiority ; and that sense—strangely old and worn out as it seemed all at once to have become—embittered the present reversal of everything. In a moment she beheld her future sisters-in-law with Mrs Waterfield's eyes, and her own dropped on the floor.

“That will be another ‘out’ for you,” said Gilbert, reckoning up. “I should say the Waterfields are good for a tea, or a luncheon—if not a dinner. No ; not a dinner, of course. No ; of course no one is dining out from this house at present. But they might go to tea, Rosamund ? What do you say ? Another tea, and musical afternoon, like the first, eh ? What should you say to that ? Ah ! you two,” turning to his sisters again, “you know nothing about that sort of thing yet. Oh dear, no ! Demure as two church mice. You wait a bit. We’ll give you our experience by-and-by.”

“Bestow a little of it upon us now, sir,” petitioned Henrietta, saucily, — “that is, if Rosamund does not mind,” for Rosamund had

averted her head; "What about that first afternoon? What happened then? Was it then you fell in—you know what?" nodding delightedly.

"There now, if she has not hit the nail on the head, the monkey!" cried the fond brother, in an ecstasy. "Who told you that, you little pug-nosed thing?" pinching the said feature. "I suppose you think yourself too clever to live, now."

"Let me go—ha! ha! ha!—let me go!" screeched Etta. "Get away, you nasty thing——"

"Etta, Etta," whispered Emily.

"He has made my nose red for the evening."

"Which it was before, and shining," retorted he.

"It was not," emphatically. "Was it, Em?"

"'Sh, 'sh, don't be so rough," was Em's rejoinder. "Can't you see Rosamund is not laughing?" in a low voice, as Rosamund moved away. "Do, Etta—do, Frederick—not set each other on. Do remember it is our

first evening," admonished she, glancing apprehensively round. "Don't let us be herding together; and do, Etta, take care what you say. Talking about your nose! What will Rosamund think, if you begin like that?"

She need not have feared. Rosamund had not heard a word. Gilbert's opening appeal, with its allusion, had been enough for her, and had sent back her thoughts and memory to the past with a new pang, so fresh and startling, that she herself recoiled from it.

Lord Hartland's denunciations had been like wine to her flagging energies. They had poured new life into her veins, and braced and strengthened every feeble nerve that had been drooping before. To impress him with a sense of her intention and fitness to carry out her own purposes, she had been ready to think no sacrifice too great,—but her lover was now every moment undoing all that another had done for him.

There he stood, and she could not but own him unchanged, unaltered—all that he had

ever been. He had developed no vices, bared no hidden depths, sprung upon her no unsuspected and detestable traits of character. So far from this, she had not even learned any trifling inclinations, nor become familiar with any opinions or feelings which had not been boldly proclaimed at the outset. All with him had been open as the day : in her alone had been the change.

Heretofore she had been blind—now she saw.

The mist had cleared away, and in the terrible new-found daylight, all that had before been but dimly viewed, stood out unblenching.

Could she ever own it? Could her pride ever stoop to make so humbling an admission? Could her justice ever offer so hideous an insult?

Her lip trembled as at the moment came a peal of merry laughter from across the hearth, and it was a sob that she swallowed in her throat, when they thought she coldly turned away.

Gilbert, with an arm around each fondling sister, by turns whispering in the one ear and the other, felt as if he had allowed his old pets to usurp him too completely, as he also marked the retreating figure; and by no means ill pleased that his fair betrothed should seem to think the same, he now shook the others gaily off, and advanced to make his peace.

“They want me to tell tales,” he cried, “but I know better. We can keep our own counsel, can’t we, Rosamund? It is nothing to them whether or not it was a case of love at first sight, is it?”

She smiled faintly.

“I shall never forget how you looked when you came in that day,” proceeded he, sliding his arm round her waist, despite a shrinking effort to evade it. “You fairly bowled me over then and there, as I have told you a hundred times since, haven’t I? How those dull, sheep-faced Waterfield girls had not the sense to see what was up, I can’t think. They

would go on talking and singing to me. I tell you, Rosamund, I should never have taken up with one of them if there had not been another woman in the world."

"You don't suppose that they——" she stopped.

"Oh, we'll give 'em the benefit of the doubt. Only, you know, there are such a lot of them; and they do stand so deplorably in each other's light. However, Parson Stoneby might do for one, and I'll see if I can't do something among our fellows for another. As they are your friends——"

"Which you seem to forget," said Rosamund, struggling with her feelings. "I think, Frederick, you might choose other subjects for your sarcasm than the oldest—almost the only friends I have."

"My sarcasm! Good gracious! my dear girl, I meant no sarcasm; be hanged if I did! I was in grim earnest, I assure you. I told them all at the barracks what nice girls the Waterfields were, and one or two went over,

and liked them awfully ; and it was only the fact of there being six of them,—come now, you know what I mean. I thought we had always agreed about the Waterfields : but you do turn round upon one so,” deprecatingly. “ We had not met each other three times when you confided to me how those girls bored you ; and now——” and he rubbed his chin, and looked at her as much as to say, “ and now, how is a poor fellow to know where the wind will shift to next ? ”

“ Whatever *I* may say,” replied Rosamund, unable to repress herself, “ *you* have no right,—you ought to remember that in *you* it is a liberty. Pshaw ! don’t look like that,” for his eyes had opened roundly. “ I am grandiloquent, I suppose,” forcing a laugh : “ excuse it, please ; it is an old trick of mine to stand up for the absent. Pray, let us say no more,—and pray, let me go,” she added in an undertone, which had the immediate and desired effect.

(“ Hang it all ! I wish those girls would not

keep watching us, and pretending not to see," muttered the repulsed lover, aware that the twitch of a restive shoulder had emphasised the peremptory demand. "They will not understand that it is only her way. When I can get 'em alone for a good long talk, I must drop 'em a hint, once for all.")

It appeared that he could not accompany the party to the Abbey.

Two o'clock? No, he was certain he could not possibly manage it, as he had an appointment soon after three, and well he knew what two o'clock luncheons meant. If the hour had been one, he might have had a try for it, and got off by half-past two; but after all, there would have been no depending even on a one o'clock luncheon at the Abbey. Aunt Julia, he supposed, hardly knew that such a virtue as punctuality existed; and as there was no saying when they might sit down, so there was no saying when they might get up again—and so on, and so on,—considering which, he thought it best to give up the

whole thing, since there was no sense in a scramble and a bother.

For the sake of the resolution at the end, Rosamund forgave him all that had gone before.

She had grown to mind even having Aunt Julia's little well-known foibles commented upon. It awoke resentment even to hear so much as a peccadillo noted in those whom she was fast learning to rank as her own people, with whom Major Gilbert had nothing to do, and of whom he had no business to speak: and the easy manner in which he on his part adopted all relationships, and in especial the familiar intonation of his "Aunt Julia," was something in itself sufficient to provoke a most perplexing and unfortunate fit of the sulks. On such occasions he could not for the life of him think what he had done.

As often—more often than not, it would be something entirely to the good lady's credit which had been dropped, and yet he would see his mistress's brow grow black as night,

and her eyes beneath gleam blue and threatening.

“She is so infernally sensitive, that is the only fault I have to find with her—and after all, that’s breeding,” he would console himself. “There’s no judging a thorough-bred by ordinary rules. I know that at bottom she is my own dear, jolly, little girl; and it will be no bad thing for the other fellows to find that Mrs Frederick Gilbert means to keep ’em in their places. Dale’s wife and Jekyll’s wife won’t be quite as thick with Lady Caroline Liscard’s daughter as they suppose,” and such a reflection was sufficient to restore immediate serenity.

He would even chuckle in anticipation of having a wife whose spirit would do for him what he had never been able to accomplish for himself.

It had been one of the sources of his popularity that he could not give the cold shoulder to the tiresome and objectionable; and that, though a sufficiently strict regimental major,

and thoroughly capable of maintaining military order and discipline when within barracks—at other times and in other places he was in no respects formidable; and he was secretly aware that it would add to his dignity to be more reserved, important, and exclusive.

His marriage would do this for him. A married man, aided and abetted by his wife, could take a new departure; and when, added to this, there was the having wedded a grand-daughter of the family held in first repute in the neighbourhood, every one would see that he had a right to a step in the social scale. Had Rosamund been the heedless, flighty young girl he had at first found her, she might indeed have charmed, but she could never have awed; whereas now!—and he felt that now she could awe even himself. Unfortunately, as we know, the forbearance engendered by these agreeable ruminations was thrown away upon its object.

Rosamund would now scarce make an effort

to conceal displeasure or annoyance ; and thus, on the present occasion, when it was a question of his going or not going to the Abbey, whereas he himself debated the *pros* and *cons* with all imaginable earnestness, his sisters meantime hanging on every breath, as if on the event depended all their promised pleasure—the one who should, who ought to have been at least as, if not more, deeply interested than any, yawned almost in her lover's face, hummed a tune only half inaudibly, and the moment the conclusion was arrived at, introduced another topic without a syllable of demur or regret.

The good effects of the garden scene were fast passing away.

Why should she regret, forsooth ? She had never asked him to go. He had never been invited. Who was to say that Lady Julia even wished for his company ?

As a matter of fact, she knew very well that Lady Julia wished for nothing of the kind ; and on Miss Gilbert's eager presentation of

her brother's apology on the following day, this was allowed to be tolerably apparent.

"My brother bade me say how extremely sorry he was to be prevented coming with us," began Miss Emily, to whom the message had been intrusted, and who had undertaken to deliver it, nothing doubting. "He has a very important engagement at three o'clock, and as he could not be sure of getting back to Longminster by that time, he felt it would be wise to give up coming at all. He hoped you would be so kind as to excuse him, Lady Julia."

Lady Julia looked at the speaker. If she had given utterance to what was in her heart, she would have said, "And who are you to inform me of all this? Had any apology been required—which was not the case, since I never asked, nor meant your brother to come—it was not your place to make it."

As, however, this must be for herself alone, she could outwardly only take refuge as her niece before her had done, in a look of satisfaction, almost too obvious to escape notice.

She had scarcely dared to hope that Major Gilbert would not come. He would certainly not hesitate about a welcome. He had shown too often already that he knew his privileges and meant to claim them, for any bashfulness to arise at this period.

More than once during the past weeks he had put in an appearance just when she was sitting down to table at two o'clock, and had eaten a partridge and a couple of roast apples—her favourite luncheon—with the appetite of a healthy, and the appreciation of a hungry man. Sometimes ere she could get out in the morning, he would be tapping at the pane of her boudoir window with his walking-stick, asking for a message for King's Common, or a companion on his walk thither. The Abbey lay between Longminster and King's Common, therefore it was scarce a ten minutes' loss to run up to the house and back; and as he had told his sisters, he fancied Lady Julia liked the attention. As a fact it worried her beyond everything. She never felt safe from

him. She would find him on her return from her afternoon drive, comfortably ensconced in an easy-chair over the drawing-room fire, perusing the newspaper. He would sometimes dash in later still, quite late, on his way back, after dining with the Liscards, for no reason, as it appeared, whatever. He liked to think he was at home at the Abbey—that was the real truth; and as he had never fully awakened to the fact that he was not, he imagined that it only needed perseverance to make him so. “I am looked upon quite as one of the family already,” had been an early boast, but he still felt the necessity of making it good on every possible occasion. On the present one, his regrets had been doubled, since they were not only for his own and Rosamund’s benefit, but for that of his sisters also; and in the delivery they lost none of their importance, not even the slightness of Lady Julia’s “Indeed?” nor her serene dismissal of the subject, being sufficient to overturn it.

“My brother said he knew you would understand. His time is not his own. He is not his own master,” proceeded the deputy, volubly; “at least that is what he told me to say,—for of course there is at present no one over him at the garrison. He has been in command there for some months. But the gentleman who has made the appointment, is coming from London; and my brother has to meet him at a certain time——”

“No doubt. I quite understand.” Even the tender-hearted Lady Julia was obliged to exert herself. “Rosamund, my love!” turning to her niece—but having got so far, the good lady suddenly found she had nothing to go on with.

She had felt absolutely obliged to put an end to Miss Gilbert, but not being versed in incivility, the attempt had almost ended in a dead lock. “You walked, I suppose?” came at length in a somewhat lame conclusion.

There was no doubt about their having

walked; their boots and skirts were mud-stained, and their cheeks—all but Rosamund's—were rosy and blooming. The contrast appeared suddenly to strike Lady Julia.

“You look quite tired, dear child,” she added, tenderly. “You have not been walking much of late. Still, the distance is not great,” and again she glanced uneasily at the slight figure, which drooped wearily into a chair, while the hat fell back from a forehead paler than its wont, round which the dark, moist rings of hair bestrewed themselves.

“I think I am a little tired, Aunt Julia.”

“And—and warm,” said her aunt, leaning over her. “Yet the day is not very warm. Your hands are so hot——”

“Oh, never mind them.”

“And—and——”

“Leave me alone; there's a darling!” whispered Rosamund. “I—I don't think I am quite well to-day.”

“Not well? Cold? Sore throat? Head-

ache, my love? There is a great deal of illness about, and Dr Makin has several cases of scarlet fever in the village. He told me so yesterday. Oh, my dear child, I do trust you have not taken scarlet fever. You might easily have caught the infection, either at church or school——”

——“Would God I had!”

So low and anguished was the cry, that it escaped every ear but that on the strain to catch it; but the effect on Lady Julia was all that might have been expected.

She saw,—she saw at last.

The shuddering accents, the exceeding bitter moan, with its accompaniment of averted eye and trembling lip,—oh, what else could it mean than the one thing—misery of heart and mind, not of the mere body?

And then, in an instant, all that Hartland had ever said or pointed at, rushed back upon her amazed and awakened recollection, sharp and distinct, now that the lightning-flash of revelation had struck it.

He had *hinted* that Gilbert was not appreciated, not beloved as he ought to be; and such must indeed be the case.

But—not beloved? That meant as much to her—or so she fancied—as to the unhappy wretch himself. It meant—it meant—oh, what did it not mean?

And she could do nothing, say nothing, and learn no more at this most unfortunate moment—a moment which, under other auspices, might have been laden with meaning and result! Rosamund's convulsive brow, her despairing whisper and in-drawn breath must have been the outcome of a great internal convulsion, not to be altogether repressed; and who could tell what might not have been allowed or betrayed had she but been permitted to have had the opportunity to herself? Could she but have held her darling to her heart, and pleaded for a confidence! Of late, confidence had been withheld—and that for the first time in Rosamund's young life. Was it now to be

restored and renewed, or——. She started forward and welcomed Clementina Stoneby by kissing her on both cheeks; and it was by the merest chance that she just missed kissing Miss Stoneby's brother also.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TO-DAY SHE CARED FOR NO ONE.

“It is hard to personate and act a part long ; for where truth is not at the bottom, nature will always be endeavouring to return, and will peep out and betray herself one time or other.”—TILLOTSON.

LADY JULIA had, as we have said, been rendered so insensible to the outward scene by her own internal emotions, that she narrowly escaped outraging all propriety by saluting her parish priest on the spot with the kiss of charity ; and even, had he taken advantage of her bewilderment, and presented his close-shaven cheek for the embrace, she would not only have bestowed it without hesitation, but would have been completely oblivious of having done so then and thereafter.

The very ground she trod on seemed to shake beneath her.

She had been to the full as much rejoiced as Hartland had known she would be, to hear that he had secured the Stonebys' support for the occasion; yet she beheld them enter not only without any token of joy, but with a dazed and stupefied air, as though wondering what chance had sent them her way that morning—and presented them to the Miss Gilberts, and watched the re-adjustment of the circle as though it concerned anybody rather than herself.

Her heart—if not her eye—was for that listless form in the background,—that wreck of what had once been her bright, bold Rosamund. What havoc had here in a few brief weeks been wrought! Oh, how strange that it had been suffered to pass unmarked and unacknowledged before! Oh, how cruelly neglectful had she been!

Yet had the fond creature paused to weigh the matter, and cast her eye backwards in the

new light thus shed upon the past, she might have found wherewith to excuse herself. Rosamund, indifferent to what all others thought, had made an effort, faint enough in truth, but still an effort towards keeping up appearances when in the presence of her aunt—and had succeeded only too well. Only to-day, and only as it were at this eleventh hour, was the mask dropped. To-day, the unhappy girl cared for no one.

The sociability of the rest of the party, however, came to the aid of Lady Julia; Miss Gilbert was being attended to by Mr Stoneby, Henrietta by his sister; all looked well satisfied, and in no need of their hostess. She had time to collect herself, to remember that for the present she had a part to play, and to endeavour to thrust into a corner the tumultuous tide of inquiry and research which had burst in upon her with such sudden and overwhelming force.

How placid the rest of the party looked! How easy and informal was the group! It

had not occurred to either Rosamund or Clementina to change their usual morning frocks ; and indeed the neat, grey homespun, and the plain, black merino, were alike suited to the weather, the roads, and Lady Julia herself. Lady Julia was likewise in her everyday gown, her "paramatta," with its crape somewhat too deep to please her maid, who loved to be in the fashion.

There was no one, therefore, to interfere with the glories of Emily and Henrietta, who, resplendent in claret velvet and plush, with smartly twisted hats, a vast amount of neckerchief and handkerchief, and perfectly spotless gloves, were happily conscious of being by far the finest folks in the room.

It must be owned that those gloves gave one person present a pang. Clementina had by mistake caught up a very old pair, worn at the tips and short of buttons ; but she had comforted herself with the certainty that Rosamund would not be able to cast a stone at her in this respect. Rosamund was so much in

the habit of running over to the Abbey at all times and seasons, that as it was merely going from one little woodland path to another for a short mile, no addition was required to her garden toilet; and she had begun to disdain gloves as soon as she disdained Miss Penrose.

True to herself, she sat hatless and gloveless now.

But on the other hand, the spruce, suburban young ladies were a treat to behold, from the neat gold bands round each daintily ruffled throat, to the shining heels on each delicately-pointed, patent-leather boot.

The heels indeed shone in adversity—as lanterns in the dark. They had been cruelly used, those poor boots; they had been forced through miry, briary ways; and soft and moist, scarcely showed to the advantage they should have done, beneath costumes so elegant.

“What can Rosamund have been thinking of?” was the first and very natural thought which occurred to the country parson’s sensible little sister, with a glance at her own

stout and serviceable foot gear. "She has allowed these poor girls to trick themselves out as if for a lounge in a London park, and has then trotted them through the short cut here, though it is one long sop! And only to lunch with Lady Julia, too! Lady Julia, who wears her old clothes longer than any other woman in the parish! And Rosamund has not taken a bit of pains with herself. She looks tumbled, dishevelled, and—oh dear!—how cross and unhappy! I think she has not looked happy at all of late. I wonder ——" but then she had to attend and reply to Henrietta, who had put forth a sentiment, and further wonder and conjecture had to be adjourned. Henrietta was next to her, and, truth to tell, it was a pity that the chairs were so close together, and that both were in the full light of the largest window. Miss Stoneby's gloves looked simply disgraceful. She smuggled one hand under the cover of a small table near, and took out her handkerchief and held it crushed up in the other, and

so did her best. If she could have but taken them off, like Rosamund! But she was not in a relation's house, and Clementina needed no one to teach her to behave nicely. "Quite a little gentlewoman," had been Lady Julia's speedy verdict after the preliminary interview; and even Lady Caroline had not demurred to the phrase, but had only hoped in private that Hartland did not think so likewise.

If Hartland had ever thought about it at all, her laborious efforts to satisfy her curiosity would in all probability have produced their natural fruits; but beginning by being indifferent, he had remained so. He had on this occasion only waited for the Stonebys' coming to present himself, and would have allowed as much if any one had asked him, for sister and brother had an artificial importance at the moment very different to any Lady Caroline had ever dreaded. What she had once longed for, plotted for, and well-nigh despaired of, had actually, and within the briefest of periods, come to pass—Rosamund,

and Rosamund only, now occupied Hartland's thoughts. He had parted from his cousin on the previous evening in such fashion as made it impossible that they could meet again without some confusion, some consciousness; and she, on her part, had felt almost certain that he would not risk a meeting at all. All through the long, weary, hot, and feverish hours of the past night, when either dozing and dreaming fitfully, or lying with eyes wide open, gazing into the moonlight of a cloudless sky, the scene she had gone through—that strange scene within the dim shades of hedge and laurel, with all its bitters and its one sweet—had been ever present to her. She had in fancy heard herself speaking as she had never spoken—had only longed and burned to speak,—delivering the scornful defiance, the crushing sarcasm, the flat denial which would have so utterly put him to rout—if only, only she could have uttered it.

All the words she might have said, and had

not said, or had not been able to say, had crowded in all too late upon her; how came it that she had been so slow, so stupid, so cowardly at the time? How had she not silenced her accuser at the outset with one of those swift and sharp tit-for-tats which had ever been handy on her tongue? She had let him say things which she could never forget. His whole bearing she could never forget. It had made a breach between them which could never be healed. And all the time, and far beneath this boiling, bubbling current of wrath, there had rung two notes of the sweetest music; and “dear Rosamund” had atoned for all.

A deep flush mounted to her brow as Hartland now entered, and presently approached her.

Taught by Lady Julia, he had already made his bow to the strangers, lingered a moment by Clementina Stoneby, and nodded and smiled to her brother; and then—when he could no longer avoid doing so—he made his

way slowly up the room, to where Rosamund sat apart.

The two hands met, but neither looked at the other. Stoneby, who had happened to turn his head that way, felt a curious sensation at the moment.

He had thought, until within a few hours ago, that he knew Lord Hartland as himself. By putting two and two together, he had been perfectly cognisant of the family arrangement, which, if it had been carried out, would have secured an ample fortune and a fair bride to his friend, and while he had perhaps secretly marvelled at Hartland's rejection of both, he had respected his disinterestedness.

It was strange, it was passing strange that he, that any one could resist that bewitching creature,—alas! poor Jack—and many a time and oft had the gentle scholar mused over the ways and dealings of that mysterious overruling Providence which would at times seem to mock with its gifts, by offering them to those who value them not, while others eager

and longing, behold them only afar off. But now it seemed on a sudden, that the end had not been yet come at.

That there was a shadow, an embarrassment in the meeting between the cousins, he felt instinctively ; and for it, Hartland's confessed antipathy to Gilbert scarcely accounted.

What Hartland had said of Rosamund herself flashed through his mind. At the time he had not given it serious consideration ; he had thought it wild talk ; and had told himself that the speaker, misled by his own feelings, had been carried too far. But in spite of himself, he now experienced a cold misgiving. He thought he must make a venture, in order to lay it to sleep. Gilbert (no doubt incited thereto by his betrothed) had that morning sent him a handsome cheque for the relief of a poor family in the parish upon whom great distress had fallen.

He would go up to Miss Liscard now, and speak handsomely of the liberal-minded donor.

It might be that the benevolent action had

merely proceeded from a desire to stand well with the Liscards, whose tenants the sufferers were,—it might be that the money was the mere overplus of a full purse, to be scattered lavishly by a prosperous lover in his hour of triumph,—it might, on the other hand, proceed from a higher motive; but from whatever source sprung, the gift was a valuable and generous one, and it would be only seemly that he should speak of it, and speak with gratitude.

“I suspect I have to thank you for the great pleasure I received this morning,” he accordingly began, drawing near, when it had become plain that his host was standing mutely aside, and that nothing more was going to be said or done for the nonce. “I never was more surprised, and it is really too kind of Major Gilbert.”

“What is too kind?” said Rosamund, scarcely lifting her eyes.

She would have answered more civilly if he had introduced any other name.

“His handsome donation. No doubt you were the kind promoter——”

“I have heard of no donation,” interrupted she, as cold as ice.

“Indeed! Oh, I certainly thought I could not be mistaken as to whom I was indebted.”

No answer.

“He did not even tell you he was going to send it?”

“No. Why should he? I don’t know what you mean. What has Major Gilbert”——(it appeared as if the very name came out with an effort)——“been doing?”

“All that is kind and praiseworthy, I assure you. But,” reflecting, “I hope I am not breaking confidence. Perhaps I should not have spoken”——as a sudden remembrance of a rapid scrawl in postscript, “Oblige me by not mentioning this,” dawned upon him. Could it have been really meant to be acted upon? To tell the truth, it had never once occurred to him that the writer had so meant it.

Now Gilbert had. In matters of business he was strictly business-like, and to underline, emphasise, and repeat was not his way. In simply adding the above brief clause, he had thought he had done sufficient to ensure the wish being attended to. "Dear me!" said Jack, feeling rather ashamed of himself, "it really did not occur to me that he had intended I should keep it from you."

At last he had succeeded, and her curiosity was piqued.

"When you *have* told me, Mr Stoneby," quoth Rosamund, with a flash of her old vivacity, "it will be time enough to decide whether you ought to have done it or not. Pray, then, let us hear this wonderful secret."

"Will you stand between me and Major Gilbert if I reveal it?"

At that moment she looked as if she would not have stood between anybody and Major Gilbert—as if his very presence would have sent her from him, driven her forth, it mattered not where.

"This is absurd," said she, starting to her feet; and Lady Julia's "Luncheon, my dear," and her tender drawing of her niece's hand within her arm the next moment, seemed as the shelter to which the impetuous girl had sprung.

"You want your luncheon, don't you, love?" whispered the kind aunt, giving the aforesaid hand a little pressure; "not very bright to-day, I can see, darling." Then lower still, "I will try to like them, Rosamund—I will really try; and they are very nice, I am sure, are they not?" added she, scarce knowing what she said, in a vague desire to comfort and cheer.

Rosamund gave a little laugh. As if anything now could do any good! What were poor Em and Etta to her? They were but small parts, fractions of the hopeless, miserable whole.

They were now on in front, reluctantly leading the way, or, to speak more correctly, being herded onwards by those behind, whom they in vain attempted to let pass.

Little Clemmy Stoneby, stumping sturdily alongside, being quite aware that she and they were in their right order of precedence, marvelled much at their uncertain, wavering movements and wistful countenances; but she could not impart to them any of her own composure.

Like their brother, they were thrown out by anything new and unfamiliar; and as they had never before seen so stately an affair conducted so simply, it was not until all were seated, and the blinds had been drawn down because the sun had come out and was in Henrietta's eyes, that they severally began to recover.

One was on each side of the host; Mr Stoneby sat on Lady Julia's right hand, Rosamund opposite to him, and next her was Clementina, pulling off her shabby little gloves as fast as she could, and with her round, good-humoured face restored to its wonted serenity by the process. Her mind was now at rest—and perhaps as much could

not have been said of any one else present.

The Miss Gilberts were, however, in a state of alternate anxiety and elation, divided betwixt astonishment at their present exceeding good luck and their desire to comport themselves creditably under it. They had not of themselves selected these favoured seats; and having merely obeyed by instinct the authoritative glance of the old major-domo, and the footman's significant drawing back of the chairs in question, they had no qualms of conscience on that head.

The only thing was, they did hope that Rosamund knew how it had been done, knew that they had not been to blame, that they had not encircled Lord Hartland thus of their own free will. They had begun to stand in considerable awe of their future sister-in-law, and had found that every hour increased rather than diminished the feeling. If she had frowned and looked indignant at this crisis, it would have been unfortunate indeed.

But they could not catch her eye at all ; she was dreamily gazing through the great bay-window, and they came to the conclusion finally that they had nothing to fear. Their spirits rose ; and with a young man, and a nice young man, and a peer of the realm, to talk to, they could talk against anybody. Henrietta, as usual, led the way.

“What a lovely country this is, Lord Hartland ; and what a lovely place King’s Common is ! Such lovely gardens,—and such a lovely park,—and that lovely old avenue,—and—oh, it is all so lovely !”

“You are not seeing it at its best,” replied he, good-humouredly. “It is kind of you to be so charitable. We think it looks a little dreary just at this time.”

“Indeed, I cannot believe it could ever look dreary,” cried she, “nor this lovely Abbey neither. Emily and I said so to each other ever so often to-day, did we not, Emily ? Rosamund said she thought it dull.”

“Did she ?” he stole a long, furtive glance

up the board, but Miss Henrietta was helping herself to potatoes, and did not see it.

“Only King’s Common, of course. Oh, not the Abbey,—not *your* place,” explained she, swiftly; “but I am sure it is because Rosamund is not very well this autumn. My brother thinks the shock upset her; so, naturally, she takes a gloomy view of things.”

“Yes.”

“We don’t think it dull; we never saw anything prettier than those trees we passed under to-day. They were perfectly red all over; and that lovely view from the white gate.”

“Oh, you came that way. You must have found it wet under foot.”

“It was, rather; but then it was so lovely. Emily, where did Rosamund say that lovely path led to? All the way to some place three miles off—what was it?”

“I daresay Lord Hartland can tell you, considering the path leads through his own woods, and belongs to himself,” observed

Emily, severely. ("Just like her, the stupid thing!") "How charming it must be," turning affectedly to him, "to be able to walk on and on for ever in your own woods! Rosamund says you can walk about all day and never go outside them, and never re-cross the path."

"They are nice enough in summer, — I should have preferred the road myself to-day."

"We did get rather torn and dirty. The bramble branches were so long, and stuck to us."

"Followers, you know," tittered Etta, growing coquettish. Could she have known what a vision the little word recalled! Hartland, who was pouring himself out a glass of water, raised his eyes, dropped them again, and then behind the tumbler which he held to his lips, took a second long, stolen, earnest look at his cousin. That old, old scene of the "follower"! That pleasant walk! That merry talk! That time when he might—oh, he had let it all

pass; and now the "follower" held on, and he could not tear him off, as he could once have done,—as he *had* done,—as——. For full a minute the present scene was lost in the past.

Before the meal was over, he had looked at Rosamund many times. He could not tell what to think about her.

At one time the soft, curved, pear-shaped cheek next him would be suffused in deepest crimson, at another pale as death,—one moment she would be talking fast and eagerly, at another lost in reverie; but two things she never did,—she neither tasted a morsel of the food before her, nor did she once turn her head his way.

"She will never forgive me," was his conclusion.

Emily Gilbert had now turned to Clementina, and was doing her best to talk of parish matters, and betraying a large share of kindly ignorance on the subject.

There were but few really poor people round

her own home, she averred, most of the people were well-to-do small tradespeople and artisans, a good many of whom had employment in divers large works near.

They had no cottagers, no labourers : oh no, they lived far too near London for that : in fact they called themselves Londoners ; ten minutes took them to a London station.

For her part she loved the country. How delightful it must be to live in such a pretty neighbourhood as this, for instance !

And what a sweetly pretty church ! Would Miss Stoneby take them over it some day ? Oh, any day would do. Next week, perhaps. They were not going away just yet. And the cottages ! Those low, thatched roofs, so curiously close down over the windows and doors, how cosy, how comfortable they looked, and so picturesque !

“ More picturesque than comfortable,” replied downright Clementina. “ Unless those thatched cottages are kept in thorough repair—which is constantly being needed, and very

expensive to have done—they are not weather-proof. Lord Hartland's cottages are always well looked after," she added, with a smile to him, for some vigorous repairs, in which the parson's sister had been keenly interested, had just been carried out; "but I cannot say the same for our other landlords. We have a sad case in point. A portion of a roof fell in the other night, in the midst of that hurricane of rain and wind, and it broke the furniture all in pieces, and the poor man who was in bed in the next room, too ill to move, had to lie there hour after hour, expecting that every blast would bring down the remainder of the roof upon his own head."

"Was there no one to move him? Why, I would not have let him lie still there," cried Miss Gilbert, who was energetic like her brother, and was quite equal to having carried forth the invalid in her own arms, and would, moreover, certainly have done so, had she been by.

"There was no one in the house but two

small children. His wife died some time ago, and the person who looked after him had chosen to take herself off for the night."

"The wretch! Surely, Miss Stoneby, you won't let her go back?"

"No, indeed," said Clementina, pleased with the interest her little tale had aroused, for now all the table was listening. "We have taken means to prevent that. And some one else, Miss Gilbert, has done more than any of us. Your brother——"

"I declare I was thinking of Frederick. I was wishing he could hear you. He would be sure to give you something. You catch him, and tell him what you have told us, Miss Stoneby, and you see if he does not give you something."

"I don't need to wait for that," quoth the pleased and amiable Clemmy, looking round with a glow of anticipated triumph in her forthcoming announcement. "You have shown how well you know your brother, and

how correctly you judge what he would do. He sent Jack a ten-pound note for the poor man this morning."

There was a general murmur of applause.

"There now, that was Frederick all over," observed Henrietta, when the hum had died out. "He never waits to be asked twice, does he, Em? We think a good many times before we try to get anything out of him, Em and I, just because he is so good-natured. And when it's for any charity or collection, though he teases ever so much first, he always gives us something good at last."

"And he never says a word about it," added Emily; "he will never tell us a word about this ten-pound note, will he, Etta?"

("Dear me!" reflected Jack Stoneby, all parson at the moment, "how I wish I had known of this worthy gentleman's proclivities before! I must certainly—yes, I certainly must make up for lost time now, however.")

(“Another in the eye for me,” reflected Lord Hartland at the same instant. “But if I have got to like Gilbert, I vow Jack has got to like him too. And as for Rosamund—Rosamund shall *not* marry him.”)

CHAPTER XXV.

A MISERABLE HOUR.

“Nought is there under Heaven’s wide hollowness
 That moves more deare compassion of the mind
 Than beauty brought t’ unworthie wretchednesse
 Through envie’s snares or fortune’s freaks unkind.”

—SPENSER.

ROSAMUND did not indeed look a bride for any one the next minute.

She had been absently paring a russet apple on her plate, having taken no part in the foregoing discussion, when on a sudden the fruit-knife dropped from between her fingers, her cheek crimsoned with a deep wide-spread stain, and an exclamation of surprise—almost of anger—escaped her.

Others at the same moment turned their heads, for there in the doorway, which a foot-

man had just thrown open, stood Major Gilbert himself, all eagerness and happy explanations. His appointment had been put off to another day ; he had received the telegram postponing it an hour before, on the arrival of which he had at once ordered his trap and driven over at the best rate he could, knowing he should be late, but feeling confident of catching up the party at some point of the luncheon, and being able to make up speedily for lost time. To suppose for an instant that he had by any chance not done the right thing, was the very last idea that would have occurred to him : he had counted on the joy his tardy appearance would occasion, all the way as he came along.

“ Anything will do,” he said heartily ; “ but I did not think you would have got on so far,” looking round on the blue-and-gold dessert-plates. “ Are you not rather exceptionally punctual to-day ? ” to his hostess. “ To tell the truth, Lady Julia, I was shabby enough to confide in my sisters yesterday that the

Abbey was not of all places the one most noted for punctuality. I had been reckoning on that, I am afraid. Well, Rosamund, so here you are," patting her shoulder as he passed to his chair from shaking hands all round the table. "And so you all got here safe and sound? Dirty work walking to-day, eh? Or did you drive?"

"We walked."

"But you will not walk back, my love," interposed Lady Julia, beginning to recover herself. She, in common with all present, had experienced a certain shock at the unlooked-for interruption. The shock—of pleasure to his two sisters—of mingled pain and curiosity to the rest, had been succeeded by a suspension of everything, a numbness,—and it was well that Gilbert himself was so ready and able to cover this. Lady Julia, as we have said, was the first to recover, and even she recovered slowly and reluctantly. She felt as if she could never forgive the intrusion, and yet she knew she must forgive it, must at

least seem not to see, nor to consider it as such,—it was, it must be looked upon but as the prelude to many more. As for Rosamund, the kind creature would not look at her darling, so sure she felt that they were once more in sympathy, as they had ever been. It was terrible—terrible.

“You will not walk back, my love,” said she, lightly; “you can have any carriage from here that you like, you know, in case you forgot to order one from home.”

“Thank you, dear auntie,”—always gentle and soft to *her*,—“but I did order one: I told them to send the pony-chaise.”

“But the pony-chaise only holds two?”

“It will hold Emily and Henrietta. I should not drive at any rate; I have not had walking enough lately, as you all tell me.”

“For that very reason you must not overdo it: no, no, we will see about that”—(“and I shall have her to myself,” thought Lady Julia, exultingly, “and perhaps, who knows——?”)

“——Not much seeing needed,” cried Major

Gilbert's lusty, jovial tones. "I thought that was going to be the way of it, and so I prepared a little surprise for that young lady, if she will deign to accept it. What do you think I have got here, Rosamund? Can you guess? Oh, I think you can. What but my own bonny bays again!" in evident expectation of creating a sensation. "Going as sweetly as ever. So we'll trundle the girls out of the way in the pony-chaise, and then you will mount to your own perch on the dog-cart, and we'll have a scamper. You have no idea how she likes driving tandem, Lady Julia. You tell her, Rosamund," nodding across the table. "You did not know what luck was in store for you. No more did I, till this morning. I thought that foreleg would not have been right for some days yet."

"You are surely not thinking of driving my niece in a high tandem dog-cart to-day?" demanded Lady Julia, with displeasure.

"Why not?" said Gilbert, with his mouth

full and his fork midway. He was eating fast, to make up for lost time, and it is difficult to eat fast and talk fast at the same time.

"She is not fit," protested Lady Julia, still frowning. "She——"

"I am quite fit," said Rosamund, perversely.

"My dear, you are not. You have not been well lately, and you owed to me when you came in that you were tired."

"The air is all she wants," interposed Gilbert; "air is the very thing for her. That was why I was so jolly glad about the horses. I mean to drive her every day I can, now that the dark bay is all right again. You tell your aunt, Rosamund, that it is the best thing in the world for you."

"Young people do not always know what is best," said Lady Julia, stiffly. "If Rosamund had been as strong as usual it would have been different; but——"

"Let her speak for herself. Let her say what she likes," cried Gilbert, not meaning to be rude, but anxious to have the matter set-

tled. "I brought the pair on purpose ; but it's no matter. One of the girls can go with me, if she's not up to it ; only I thought that Rosamund——" and he looked wistfully into her face. She was always the first with him, be the other who it might ; and a pang shot through the heart of one, at least, present, who marked and understood the poor fellow's earnest gaze. Hartland smothered an exclamation, when the cold rejoinder came at last.

"I should certainly prefer the dog-cart to the pony-chaise if it be a choice of evils," said Rosamund, sullenly ; "so if it is decreed that I am to drive, let me drive in the dog-cart. But why I may not do as I choose, I cannot see. I said I preferred walking. I am sure walking would be far better for me. You all make out I am to do what is best for me, and yet I am not to be allowed to do the very thing that is !"

"All right ; then we'll walk," cried Gilbert, giving in at once, with the utmost kindness. "I'll send the cart on to King's Common—

David can take it—and I will escort you back. There, will that do?" and he looked as if he had cut the knot cleverly, and pleased every one.

If he had, he was not permitted to think so long.

"Surely I need not be such a bugbear to you all! Surely this need not be made such a fuss about, and such a business of!" cried Rosamund, in a high, sharp voice. "It is perfectly ridiculous for us all to be planning and discussing a mere nothing, as if it were a matter of life and death"—drumming impatiently upon the table. "Why may I not do as I always used to do, and trouble nobody? I never needed any 'escort' home from here; why should I begin all at once to be so particular? Do, Aunt Julia, let us come," still more impatiently; "we cannot be required to stay on here for ever. Here are Hartland and Mr Stoneby to watch Major Gilbert eating his luncheon, and it seems years since we had ours——!"

——“ My dear child ! ”

Even Lady Julia was shocked.

“ Dear Rosamund, you—you forget yourself,” she murmured, for Rosamund had already pushed back her chair. “ My dear child—dear love, do remember.” Then louder, “ No, Major Gilbert, pray don’t hurry—pray do not think you are keeping us here. Indeed none of us wish to go in the least; it is only that dear Rosamund feels the heat of the room a little, is it not, love? The room is very hot, certainly. The sun has been on it all day, and the day is too mild for that large fire. The fire is quite too large. I feel it myself; and the weather is unseasonable, altogether unseasonable for November.”

“ I have been wanting particularly to see you, Gilbert,” added Hartland, doing his part next. “ I am making some alterations in the stables, and the builder is to be over this afternoon; so it is quite a piece of luck your being here at the same time. I had almost

written asking you to meet him, but I let the post-time slip by."

"And I too should have written," put in Jack Stoneby, who had only waited till the others had done, and who, as he was sitting next the major, could say his say without being obtrusive. "I received your note this morning, and I cannot tell how to thank you enough. Your generosity——"

Gilbert kicked his foot beneath the table. He did not know that his generosity had been already proclaimed.

All who could, had now done their best towards atoning for Rosamund's insolent assault, and her heart swelled with resentment against each one.

Why should she not say what she chose, be unfeeling, ungrateful, and rude, if she pleased, towards her lover? Gilbert was hers—not theirs. Surely she might do as she would with her own; and all that she had done and suffered on his behalf, rose up as usual to justify her. She now longed to break away from

the scene, the hateful room, and the hateful company,—to rush forth to solitude and passion, unrestraint and misery.

Strange to say, the three Gilberts were the ones with whom she was in her heart least at war. On her aunt, and Hartland, and the Stonebys—all of whom she perceived to be watchful and anxious, and beginning to interpret aright—on these she could pour the full vials of her wrath. The poor Gilberts—they were as harmless as doves—they alone did not molest her; they only were satisfied and unsuspecting, and, in consequence, to be borne; but she saw that Lady Julia was aroused, she fancied the Stonebys on the alert, and she knew that Hartland knew: they were one and all intolerable.

The dog-cart, the pony-chaise, anything would be better than that solemn, round table, surrounded by those many pairs of curious eyes, which were now turned on her, now on her lover, and now on the plates before them. It needed that she clasped her hot, trembling

hands closely on her lap, that she held her breath and set her teeth tight within her closed lips, to prevent further exposure and defeat. That she could not bear.

It seemed now as if the hostess would never rise ; and as, indeed, Lady Julia would have sat on till midnight to undo her niece's misdemeanour, she was now glued to her chair, thankful as she would have been—almost as thankful as any one—to quit it. Wild with vexation, the author of her own discomfiture had accordingly to endure a prolonged punishment ; while Gilbert, who had been unable to help feeling hurt, and had gently enough charged her with unreasonableness in his own mind, was being comforted and solaced.

Under such treatment he could not but recover, and though he had just sufficient feeling on the point to cut short his meal, and refuse cheese and biscuits, and some young, crisp, and juicy celery, of which vegetable he was particularly fond, he was himself again by the time he had finished.

“She should not have snubbed me so before them all,” he reflected; “but, poor girl, she has so much spirit, I must not be too hard upon her.”

It did not occur to him to wonder why she should have been inclined to “snub.”

Hartland was rummaging for cigars when the ladies at last left the room. “I have lots in the billiard-room,” he said, “but it is such a way off. I brought some here. I know I put them down here” — overturning papers, and peering behind mantelpiece ornaments — “on purpose to be handy; for I expect that builder fellow has come, and we may as well go out at once.”

“First say what you think of these,” said Major Gilbert, producing the handsome silver cigar-case wherewith Rosamund had endowed him in the early and palmy days of their engagement. They were moving towards the door as he spoke, and he looked at it for a moment tenderly, and, as he thought, unperceived. “I have some rather good

ones here," and he handed the case to each.

"I know them," said Hartland, joyfully accepting one; "if these are the same brand as the last, they are perfectly delicious."

"Do allow me to make you a present of a box, Lord Hartland. They are the same. I never smoke any other, and I shall be greatly honoured if you will accept some."

"You may be quite sure I shan't *refuse* them. I say, how good of you! I shall look forward every hour till that box arrives. Thanks awfully." (Then he turned away with almost a groan. All on the surface so smooth and fair, but beneath — what next? — what next?) . . .

Poor Rosamund, whom to blame or pity most we know not, but whose state of mind did not certainly render her the most agreeable companion in the world at this period, did not long enjoy the relief afforded by a general discovery of this fact.

For a brief half-hour she was indeed left in

peace, while Lady Julia explained the mysteries of some new kind of needlework to Emily Gilbert, and Clementina piloted Henrietta through an illustrated manual; and during that time she could lie back in the depths of her chair, speechless and weary, caring about nothing but to be let alone, conscious of nothing but the luxury of being unobserved and unwatched. Gradually, under the influence of the quiet room, whose distant murmurs only soothed her ear, and further refreshed by a cup of hot and fragrant coffee — Lady Julia's institution, which had never been adopted at King's Common, though greatly appreciated by the young ones whenever they came to the Abbey,—under these combined narcotics her breathings became gentler and gentler, her eyelids closed, and the heavings of her troubled bosom resembled the slow swell of the ocean after the tumult of the storm has subsided,—thought was all but suspended, pain quite, she had nearly sunk into a slumber, peaceful and sweet as an

infant's, from sheer exhaustion of mind and body——when, as it seemed with a deafening and odious clamour, an incomprehensible, cruel uproar, she was all in a moment recalled to the present scene, and to the entrance of Eleanour, Violet, and Amy Waterfield, who were walking up the room.

Waterfields, now ! Waterfields at this most unfortunate, most miserable juncture !

No words can depict the feelings of the unhappy Rosamund. She had dreaded their return, and wished the first meeting well over, and had wound herself up to carry it off bravely ; but that they should have her thus at vantage was unfair indeed.

She had known very well how they felt about her engagement ; the letters had been exactly what she had expected. They had hoped she would “be very happy,” and had been sure Major Gilbert “was very fortunate,” and she had tossed the epistles scornfully aside, and had responded in set terms, which had been understood with equal distinctness by them on

their part. This formality accomplished, there had been a lull, with an ever-increasing repugnance towards breaking it. To have it broken thus! To have this added to all that had gone before!

Not only to have her little comforting nap rudely interrupted at its sweetest moment, just when senses and sounds were fading away into the soft, seductive confusion of dreamland—not only to be recalled to thinking, and talking, and ceremony, and Lady Julia's drawing-room, when she would so fain have been anywhere, anywhere else in the kingdom—but to be called upon with her present enfeebled powers to encounter the friends whose opinion she feared the most in the whole world, and discuss the subject she would of all others have avoided!

If anything more had been needed to fill the cup of bitterness, the presence of Emily and Henrietta Gilbert supplied it.

This must now be their introduction to the polite, composed, critical companions of Rosa-

mund's youth, whose society even Lady Caroline had cultivated, and whose approbation even she, in her heart, had considered worth obtaining.

At no more luckless moment could Em and Etta have been subjected to first view.

Perhaps nobody looks to advantage during the torpid, digestive hour immediately succeeding a heavy mid-day meal, especially if the room be warm, the windows shut, and the conversation languid. There is a general air of plethora about a party so situated. Eyes grow dull, cheeks pale, expressions inanimate; while even the dress would seem to partake of the same reaction, and is apt to look negligent and disarranged.

Thus with our spick-and-span young ladies, who had stepped in so briskly, all tied up, curled up, and twisted up two hours before; they were now limp and sodden; Emily's hat had crept down over one eye, and Etta's neckcloth had contrariwise crept up; while the smart pin which had heretofore kept it jauntily in its

place, had by some means or other worked itself loose, and hung forlornly over on one side.

The neat gloves, Clementina's envy, were no longer there to hide rather large, red, and ill-shapen hands; and the unsuitability of the patent-leather boots was more than ever apparent, now that the mud had dried upon them.

No one else had suffered to the like extent: true, Lady Julia's cap had slipped slightly awry, but otherwise she looked much as usual; Clemmy Stoneby would always be Clemmy Stoneby, and from having at no time any looks to lose, found her advantage at a moment like the present; but the Gilberts, who were not without pretensions to beauty of a certain order and under certain conditions, were, it must be allowed, hardly dealt with, in being thus caught and held up to the light; and the pang of mortification experienced by Rosamund in recognising the truth of this, brought her to herself sooner than anything else could have done.

"It only needed this!" she said, to herself.

“ Well, after all, nothing matters much now. I have got to go through with it all ; and one thing more or less—still it *is* hard. I had meant to be so careful about when and where the Waterfields saw them. These odious frocks and hats—and they themselves—I declare Emily hardly looks handsome at all, and Henrietta positively ugly. Oh, why—why—why——” and with the “ why, why, why,” and a long and weary sigh, she had to rise, feign a wan smile, and drag herself to the front.

The Waterfields, on their part, considered it rather a happy idea to get over this awkward meeting when at the Abbey, and under Lady Julia’s wing. They had not anticipated it over readily themselves, but they had seen that, could it be come at haphazard, as it were, it might be shorn of half its disagreeables ; and accordingly, on hearing at King’s Common, where they had stopped half-way, that Miss Liscard and her guests were to be found at her aunt’s, they had joyfully followed her thither. A spice of lively curiosity had been added to

other feelings when the young ladies had been spontaneously informed who were Rosamund's guests, and further, that Major Gilbert's sisters had only arrived on the previous evening. They had not lifted so much as an eyelash indeed, in the presence of their informant; but no sooner had King's Common been left behind, than congratulations had passed, and steps had quickened. There had not been two opinions as to the advisability of proceeding to the Abbey; the advantages of so doing had been too obvious.

"The more the merrier, certainly," Eleanour had said. "With so many others present, of course nothing of consequence can be said; and even about poor Lady Caroline it would be difficult to find just the right thing to say, if we had Rosamund all to ourselves."

They were, we thus see, jubilant and strong; while she was weak, worn, and already spent by contest: everything was on their side, nothing on hers.

Dejected, querulous, apprehensive, and sus-

picious, with an aching sense of her own folly and guilt overshadowing every outlook, can it be wondered at that poor Rosamund was in no case to hold her own, far less to shield her friends? *Her* friends? Yes, in that light must Gilbert and his family now be one and all regarded. She had brought them there. She had brought them into notice at all. But for her—but oh, she must not, durst not think of this now.

Sick at heart, she exchanged the unmeaning kiss all round.

How gay and heartless sounded the voices of the new-comers! How fresh and insulting the bloom upon their countenances! She and hers all in shadow—they all in sunshine! Then they sat down, and she heard the lively buzz begin, and marked the quiet, inspecting glance, and felt and knew what was being thought, and told herself she did not care, and almost laughed when Etta said something more glaringly inappropriate than usual, and laughed again when Emily's scarlet top-knot lurched

rakishly over, nearly brushing Violet Waterfield's cheek,—and, reckless, told herself it was all very amusing, and would make an excellent scene for her old friends to jest over when they returned home, and—and—what was that?

The door opening, the gentlemen coming in, Gilbert's loud full-toned voice dominant in the doorway, Gilbert's laugh noisily echoing up the room——

——“I—I—oh, hold me, Eleanour!” cried Rosamund, and fell fainting on the floor.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“ANY OTHER COURSE WOULD BE
UNWORTHY.”

“It behoves the high
For their own sake to do things worthily.”

“It is a case of nervous prostration, Lady Julia. Complete nervous exhaustion, and prostration of strength. Miss Liscard has experienced a severe shock to the system in that very sudden and—and deplorable death of her mother; and coming at such a time as it did—in connection with the other event,”—for the speaker was a faithful old *habitué* of King’s Common, and well up in its affairs,—“it was altogether more than this poor young lady could bear. I have known Miss Rosamund since she was a child.

Nervous—highly nervous—and excitable. It only surprised me that she did not give way before; but she has great spirit—unbounded spirit. She would confess to nothing when I questioned her more than once of late about herself. Now, Lady Julia, this is a case requiring great care—very great care, and judiciousness. You understand me? Any return to the scene of her recent distress would most certainly be detrimental. By-and-by it may be necessary to try the effects of a thorough and complete change, but for the present I must ask you to let my patient remain here.”

“‘Let’ her remain!” cried Lady Julia,—
 “‘let’ her remain, Dr Makin!” for her companion was the village doctor, once or twice before mentioned, and the two were together in the otherwise deserted drawing-room, he having been sent for in hot haste an hour before; “why, *of course* my dear niece remains. I will not permit her to be removed by any one. On my own responsibility I

should have insisted upon it; and of course now, with your authority to detain her, nothing can be said."

"Certainly—certainly you have my authority. In fact, I should consider any attempt at removal might be attended with most serious consequences. The symptoms are too grave to be trifled with."

"Quite so. Yes, I am sure they are. Just what I said myself," and Lady Julia's faint pink cheeks flushed with a sort of jubilant hilarity, and her eyes sparkled in a manner that made the worthy doctor look at her in astonishment.

"Where should the poor child be but under my roof?" proceeded she, briskly. "At whose house would she meet with greater care? Who would watch over her and nurse her as I should? Am I not now in the place of her own dead mother?"

("And a vast deal better fitted to fill it!" thought Makin.)

"Why, *of course* Rosamund is my rightful

charge, and I shall give her up to no one,” pursued the little woman, fierce as a bantam-hen over one of her brood; “and I am sure—yes, I am sure that she is quite ill enough to warrant my saying so.”

Now this was not precisely what her learned authority had meant to be the result of his words, and he was just a trifle puzzled in consequence. Of Lady Julia’s unbounded affection for her sister’s family, and for this member of it in particular, he was quite aware; and yet, in consulting him on the present alarming occasion, and discussing the chances of a serious illness to follow, instead of the tearful and tender anxiety which would have been only natural, he beheld a curious satisfaction, even an exhilaration in the good lady’s demeanour which was inexplicable.

Her great, her one thought seemed to be that the patient was not to be removed, her one fear lest others should differ on the point.

He thought she did not realise the gravity of the situation.

“She will certainly require very great care,” he observed, emphatically.

“And she shall certainly have it,” replied she, with vivacity.

He hardly knew how to make himself more intelligible. Lady Julia’s ideas and his own were clearly not in accord, and hers not precisely the sort of care he meant: of her goodwill he was secure, but of her discretion she was not at the moment giving him the most favourable of impressions.

There she stood on the tiptoe with eagerness; excitement, and apparently really pleasurable excitement, lighting up every feature, her words tripping each other up in their haste, and the lips remaining apart and ready again for immediate action, even when the stream was for a brief second checked. It was with difficulty he obtained an innings at all; and it was only by throwing all the authority he could into a profoundly solemn countenance, that he found himself in any way able to cope with the voluble spinster. “I never

knew before what a tongue she had,” he thought.

Could he have put down the whole to agitation—but Lady Julia was not a person to suffer from agitation ; her feelings were too simple, too natural ; her tears too profuse,—even on hearing of her only sister’s startlingly sudden end she had merely wept and wailed, and ordered her mourning with heartfelt but perfectly wholesome grief,—so that her present humour was against all precedent, and was, in fact, almost reprehensible.

“If there be not the very strictest watch maintained, and unless my instructions are carried out to the letter,” he pronounced, with his best frown, “recollect, your ladyship, that I cannot answer for the consequences. Your ladyship will remember that I have warned you.”

“I will, indeed, Dr Makin ; and I shall say so to every one. I shall tell them that you think very seriously indeed of my poor niece——”

——“Well, we must take care, Lady Julia. I should hardly like to say ‘very seriously indeed’; I could hardly go so far as that. I said very serious consequences might ensue——”

——“But you do think she requires the closest attendance, and the strictest guard,” urged the lady, coming closer, and glancing round, as though what she was now saying would not bear the chance of being overheard. “I am sure you think that? I am sure you said it? Do you not? Did you not?” intent upon her object. “You may be quite, quite honest, Dr Makin, you may indeed. Is that not your express desire? Have I not your orders for insisting that no one is to be admitted to her room but myself? No conversation—no letters——”

——“My dear madam, we must not go too far. We must tread softly, your ladyship, softly. We must wait and see. For a day or two I should certainly recommend absolute repose; but after that, if Miss Rosamund goes

on favourably, and would like to see a friend—one at a time——”

“Oh, if you once begin, there will be no end to it,” interrupted her ladyship, snappishly, “and I am sure you did say she ought to see no one. I assure you, and you may take my word for it, that if you wish your patient to be quiet, her only safety lies in your most positive orders that no one, no one whatever, is admitted to see her. Dr Makin, you do not know these Gilberts—forward, pushing people——” she stopped, bit her lip, and was aware of her indiscretion.

The doctor, however, prudently showed nothing. “Naturally, naturally,” he rejoined, shaking his wise head; “new connections, eager to show attention. We cannot wonder at it—but we must be careful how we permit it. We must ward them off as civilly as we can. It would certainly not do to allow them *too* much encouragement, and we must run the risk of giving offence rather than fail in our duty to our patient. Perhaps it would

be better taken if I were to speak myself——”

——“Why, yes, that is the very thing I wish!” cried Lady Julia, joyfully restoring him to all her former favour——“the very thing, my dear Dr Makin, that I am trying to point out to you. If you would take these—these strangers in hand, if the prohibition were to come straight from you, there would be no ill feeling created, and the effect would, besides, be much greater ; but if I were to interfere, it might be supposed that it was I who was trying to create an estrangement. So now, I see you understand the position, and how necessary, how absolutely necessary, it is for you to speak out boldly. Do not hesitate. A medical verdict, you know, is *never* disputed.” And she sighed her relief.

A few minutes before, she had trembled lest he was about to desert her cause and take service with the enemy.

The “enemy.” That was the light in which she now regarded Major Gilbert and his

family. Among them they had brought her darling to this pass, and they should now be annihilated (at any rate for the present, while for the future also her hopes now rose) by this most excellent mouthpiece whom Providence had sent her. Neither did Makin dislike his errand.

“It is undoubtedly indispensable that I should be plain,” he assented, cheerfully ; “and as your ladyship observes, a physician is licensed to deal with the unvarnished truth. I shall not hesitate to——”

——“Forbid their coming to the house ?”

“To Miss Rosamund’s room. I presume you would not wish to have me close your front door also ?”

She perceived that, whatever she might wish, she could hardly carry such an injunction into effect, and once more her brow faintly clouded over. But it was a great point gained that she was to have the sick-room kept sacred ; and with the thought of that dear form lying there, with the touch of

those clinging arms still hovering round her neck, that wet cheek still felt on hers, that cry whose very incoherence had made all clear—that feeble, imploring cry, “You only, you only,” ringing in her ears—with all of this so sweet, so inexpressibly sweet, to her loving heart, she was fain to be content. Her beloved was her own once more.

As soon as ever Rosamund should be sufficiently recovered, there would again be the fullest confidence between them, and their old affection would be only re-doubled and intensified by all that had passed.

The Gilbert episode should be a thing of the past (Lady Julia was rapid in her conclusions); and having become equally obnoxious to both, its termination should be as equally looked upon in the light of a deliverance.

And then, after a brief delay—there need be no hurry, nothing indecent nor unseemly—but after a proper interval had elapsed, then surely, surely the dearest project of her heart might, must, could, and should come to pass.

Had poor Caroline only lived to see it!

But poor Caroline's child should not suffer from her mother's loss. Here was she, ready and willing to play a mother's part; and in the variety of emotions thus suggested, her eyes were suffused in happy moisture, almost before the worthy doctor had put his seal upon Rosamund's bedroom door.

Rosamund had been carried up to a chamber next her aunt's—a large, warm, bright apartment—which, with its faded blue hangings, its curious walls hung with black-framed engravings, its small round mirrors, high carved mantelpiece, roomy couches and chairs, and, above all, its broad low window-seats, from which could be seen a far-stretching view of beechen slopes and sunny uplands, had ever been a favourite with her.

As a child she had always begged to be put to sleep in the huge four-post bed; she had liked to slumber off gazing upon those marvellous pictures, and those quaint devices on the ceiling. She had rejoiced to know that

Aunt Julia was on the other side of the green baize door, the door which would alone be visible when the outer one stood open, as she would have it do when there. The room had been her mother's, but Lady Caroline had never so much as heard of Rosamund's predilection for it. For herself, she had never slept at her father's house since the day she had had a home of her own; and it had never occurred to either her sister or her daughter to think it would be in the least degree interesting to her to learn that on the holiday occasions when Lady Julia's pet would be summoned thither, it was the great treat to both that Rosamund was safe and snug within the old blue room at nights.

Thither she had now been borne in her extremity.

"It was really almost providential the way it came into my head," explained Lady Julia afterwards to Hartland, "because you know, Hartland, what my poor head is. And how I ever came to think at all, what with the

shock of seeing the poor darling lying on the floor, and hardly knowing whether she were dead or alive, and all those girls crowding round, and those officious Gilberts seizing her hands,——”

“My dear aunt, be just. They were rubbing and chafing them, and that, as you know, is always considered the correct thing to do when a person faints,——”

“Much good it would have done my poor Rosamund! Well, well, it was kindly meant, no doubt, and we were all beside ourselves; but if I had not cried out, ‘Carry her to the blue room,’ there was Major Gilbert tearing along with her in his arms straight for the butler’s pantry!”

“The best place to go,” said Hartland, half laughing; “he knew he should find brandy there.”

“The brandy could have been brought, and was brought immediately—oh, by yourself, I remember. What we wanted was to get her things off, to get her undressed; and so I tried

to explain to him, for at first he had plumped the poor child down on the sofa here — on the sofa in this great, hot, noisy drawing-room ! As if she would ever have got better here ! As if, with him and his stupid, saucer-eyed sisters standing by, staring at her——”

——“Now I say, Aunt Julia—now, dear auntie, this is not in the least like you,” said Hartland, very kindly. “Why should you be so bitter against those poor girls ?”

“Why ? O Hartland ! you know why, too well—far, far too well. You have yourself spoken of it. And—and they were *dreadful*, beyond what I had even imagined. And to see them round my darling, taking possession of her——”

“Making themselves far more useful than the Waterfields did. I doubt if Rosamund would have come to herself half so quickly if it had not been for the eldest Miss Gilbert. I own I was struck with her sense and energy. And as for Gilbert, what a fine, big, strong

fellow he is ! He picked her up as if she had been a baby ! ”

“ Oh, big enough,” said Lady Julia, scornfully ; “ those sort of men, with their bulldog strength, are useful sometimes ; and as the poor child was only half-conscious, and seemed scarcely aware of what was going on, or of whom she was being held by, she could not have minded.”

“ Do you mean anything by that, ma’am ? ” said Lord Hartland, after a moment’s steady look into her face. “ Do you mean to say that you have any reason for—for supposing that Rosamund would have objected to——”

“ Now, my dear Hartland, were you not yourself the person to give me the hint ? ”

“ But you did not take it ? ”

“ Not then ; but I have done so since. I do now, for I have seen for myself.”

“ What have you seen ? ” said he, in a low voice.

“ That she detests him, shrinks from him,

and recoils from the very idea of having him for her husband."

"You are—sure—of that?" he said, slowly.

"Absolutely—absolutely sure. Oh, could any one doubt after to-day? Even before his ill-timed appearance, her wretched, sorrowful face, her piteous eyes—my heart was aching for her; and Hartland, I felt how deeply I had been to blame for not sooner having perceived the truth. But you only said *he* was to be pitied—you only said *he* was not being done justice to—and I was so stupid,—my dear, I am stupid you know,—that it never once occurred to me to think *why* I should pity him. If I had ever for a moment thought that it was because our dear Rosamund had changed her mind,—but Hartland, will it be thought,—will any harm be thought of her for changing it? Will she be thought to have—oh dear, how dreadful!—to have jilted this Major Gilbert?"

"You may set your mind at rest. She will not jilt him."

"Not?"

"She says not—that nothing will induce her to do so."

"You have spoken to her, then?" said Lady Julia, almost in a whisper. She had not supposed he had done this.

"I have."

"When?"

"Yesterday evening. There is no reason why I should not tell you about it," said Hartland, calmly, "especially since Rosamund will probably do so herself. I found her in the garden—in the rosery; and I not perceiving any one was there till I was close by—and she not perceiving me till I spoke to her—I could not help involuntarily playing the spy, and saw and heard——"

——"What?"

"Enough to warrant my taking her boldly to task for her folly and injustice. That she has made and is making herself miserable by her persistence in it, is no excuse for her."

"Oh, not so harsh—not so cruel, Hartland."

“I cannot help it, Aunt Julia ; I think Rosamund is behaving very, very badly.”

“And you are not in the least sorry for her ?”

“I did not say I was not sorry for her,” said he, gloomily.

“You have never expressed one syllable of kindness, of compassion.”

“My compassion is for the wronged and the innocent.”

“But she is so young and so innocent herself,” cried poor Lady Julia, “she did not know what she was doing. She was driven into it by her mother’s pride and obstinacy. Heaven forgive me that I should say such a thing !” fumbling wildly with the truth, “but it was so ; it really was so, Hartland. My poor sister was full of prejudices, and when once she had taken up a prejudice, nothing could move it. And then some of them being so unreasonable—for they were unreasonable, and I will say it—how were the poor children to discover which were, and

which were not? Poor dear Caroline was quite right, quite wise to object to this Major Gilbert; but then she had objected to so many people—so many *nice* people before—that she had naturally weakened her judgment in their opinion, Rosamund’s especially. Rosamund has all her poor mother’s self-will, and independence of spirit; and she has often told me that as she grew older she meant to judge, and decide for herself. Sometimes I ventured to hint to Caroline as much, but my poor sister did not take it in good part. She fancied I had no right to assume that I knew more of what her children felt, than she did. But it was a mistake—indeed, Hartland, it was a mistake—the seclusion in which those poor dears were kept. Nobody was thought good enough for them. Excellent, worthy people, if rather homely and plain, would be sneered at in their presence. If they had been provided with other friends and companions, the evil would not have been so great. They have cousins, admirably brought

up, pleasant young people, but they have hardly so much as seen them! And here, although there are several nice families about—not very near perhaps, but near enough to have been asked to dine and sleep, or spend a few days at King's Common—people such as the Weybridges, and the Caldecotts, whom Caroline herself could not have objected to,—yet they were never asked in that way. She would send them a card for her one large party in the year! Well, how was poor Rosamund to tell when her mother was right, and when she was wrong? She knows that I like and approve of many whom her mother would scarcely speak to; and she knew that even those with whose birth and breeding my sister had no fault to find, were kept at a distance!" From sheer lack of breath the speaker ran down at last.

"I never heard you speak like this before," said Hartland.

"And I cannot bear to speak like it now. I cannot bear to say such things; but it is

only justice to this poor unhappy child that somebody should stand forward on her side. Let us be on her side, Hartland, whoever is against her. Let them say what they will——”

“I tell you, Aunt Julia, there will be nothing to be said; at least, if I know Rosamund, as I think I do. I wish to heaven I could think otherwise! I may be wrong—I hardly think I am; but it is my distinct conviction now that she means to fulfil her engagement at all costs.”

“Can he not see? Can he not be made to see, and free her of his own accord?”

She drew closer, and put her hand upon his arm, as her voice breathed in his ear. He shook off the hand.

“Think what you are saying—beware of what you are advising,” he replied, in a deep, stern voice. “Would you bid her dare to do so base a thing? God help the poor child, if it is this which she is being tempted to. Oh, my dear aunt, I beg, I

beseech you, save her from it ; never let the suggestion cross your lips a second time."

Her eyes fell before his.

"All that can be done ought to be done to put her present conduct in its true light before her," continued the speaker ; "but it is not in that way, not in that way that any high-minded woman should seek to escape the chain she has forged for herself. One course only is open to Rosamund, to confess her terrible blunder, and to bear its terrible consequences. Any other is beneath her ; unworthy, most unworthy of that noble nature."

The faltering phrase appeared to escape him unawares ; he seemed for the time to have forgotten the presence of another, and to be but communing with his own spirit : and while she yet remained mute and abashed beneath the severity of his rebuke, he slowly passed out of the room.

"Dear me ! I had meant no harm. I must certainly take care how I say that again," quoth Lady Julia, promptly recover-

ing; "but it had really seemed to me the very best way in which it could have been managed."

Meantime Rosamund lay still in the faded blue chamber overhead, watching the shadows fall deeper and deeper down upon the wall in the flickering firelight, as the stars rose, one by one, in the pale sky without.

She had no desire to stir, to speak, to move; it seemed to her that if she should never again rise from that bed of weakness all would be well: she would have found rest and peace.

With her entrance into that calm abode, with the nestling down among the softly wooing pillows, with the departure of all save that one loved and loving face, there had fallen such a hush upon her spent and storm-tossed spirit as she thought she should never care to break again.

Was she going to be very ill? Delightful hope. To be very ill, and have to lie there, in that quiet haven where she had found an

anchorage, for long, long years to come? To have every entrance from the world without, sedulously barred, guarded, barricaded? To see none, speak to none, communicate with none? Oh, what bliss!—what a heaven already!

And her aunt had sworn it should be so. Poor Lady Julia, feverish as herself with anxiety upon the point, had repeated assurances and promises over and over again. “Yes, my dear, dear child, yes; it shall be as you wish, it shall indeed. I will let no one near you—no, not even the housemaids, for old Charlotte and I will do all the nursing between us. Charlotte will do everything in the room—I know she will. You shall not see a strange face. Old Nanny may come in now and then to sit by the fire. You would not mind her. She likes to fancy she is not altogether put on one side; and you would not need to talk to her,—for, my darling, you must not talk, nor move, nor even think, if you can help

it. You are safe now—safe under Aunt Julia’s care; and oh, my dear one—my dear one—Rosamund, my precious, we may be happy yet!”

Rosamund had scarcely heard, but she had felt it all.

Tears had flowed from very thankfulness.

But presently they started again from another source. She fell to wondering and recollecting.

What now would be thought about her by others? What would Hartland think, for one? Hitherto he had been so completely engrossed by Gilbert’s wrongs that he had had no room in his mind for hers. No. Not for her wrongs, perhaps, but for her misery. Would he reflect upon it now? Would he forgive her now? If she were to grow worse and die, would he not pity her just a little?

The pillow was wet beneath her head.

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